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BOOKS

DOCTOR WHO

THE INDESTRUCTIBLE MAN



SIMON MESSINGHAM



The Myloki. Mysterious aliens from beyond Space and Time.

Their target: EARTH.

The human defenders of PRISM are enmeshed in a doomed interstellar war against an unknowable invader armed with the power to possess, duplicate and destroy from within.

Only one man stands in their way. A man destiny has made indestructible.

Against all odds the legendary Indestructible Man saves the Earth but victory comes at the highest price. The world economy collapses, governments crumble and PRISM itself is torn apart by a best-selling exposé.

AD2096; PRISM has gone underground, becoming the clandestine SILOET headed by new commander Hal Bishop.

Bishop receives an urgent summons to his headquarters. An infiltrator has been unmasked and captured in the heart of SILOET itself. Fatally wounded, the infiltrator makes a miraculous recovery. It appears he is indestructible.

The implications are terrifying.

The Myloki may just have returned. And who is left to stop them?

This adventure features the Second Doctor, Jamie and Zoe.

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SIMON MESSINGHAM



DOCTOR WHO:
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This book is dedicated to Doctor Caz
for her invaluable help and support

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My wife Julie

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theheritagetrail for their description in Chapter XXX

and Mr Anderson, who did so much.

*'Such wonderful things. Such wonderful clarity. I was dying
and the dead and the everliving.'*

JOHN FANTE

Prologue

AD 2068

He would end the war today.

He would end it.

Kneeling in the dark, watching his best friend die.

Adam Nelson lay in the lunar dust, coated in debris from the collapsed Myloki headquarters. Blood traced fine patterns across his ruined face. Harsh alien lights shimmered overhead, altering the flickering angles of Nelson's Nordic bone structure. Blue eyes stared through blood and dust.

'Do it,' Adam coughed. 'Do it now.'

The Indestructible Man cradled his friend's broken body. 'I can't,' he said.

A rustle somewhere in the shadowed ruins. He looked back, sharp.

Just dust. Nothing but dust.

'They'll be coming,' Adam croaked, his training keeping him conscious. Ignoring the pain. 'You must.'

The Indestructible Man triggered his cap-mike. The plastic receiver arm flipped down over his mouth. A squall of static.

He felt something move in the darkness. A familiar dark tingle jolting his nervous system. Something approached.

Them.

'Captain Gray?' He asked, watching the flickering shadows dance round the alien base.

Gray's strained voice emerged from the aural snow. He would be surprised by the communication. 'MIC?'

'Nelson is hurt. Immediate extraction required.'

'What?' asked Gray. Understandably, the shuttle pilot wouldn't believe what he was hearing. 'Say again?'

With his good arm, Adam gripped his sleeve. Blood smeared the already scarlet uniform. Adam's angry stare locked on to him. 'No.'

He barked into the receiver. 'I said, immediate retrieval!'

A noise from the other end. The co-pilot, yelling a warning about something external - something outside the orbiting Transporter. 'Wait,' said Gray, distracted. 'I think they may have -'

There was a brief hiss and the connection was severed. A boom from overhead and a pulse of energy shook the already damaged structure.

The receiver arm flipped automatically back into his cap. The Indestructible Man rolled as dust and stone rained down. He sensed movement through the murk and hauled out his automatic pistol.

A snarling figure launched itself out of the dark at him, gangly arms wielding a metal spar. The Indestructible Man shot the Shiner down. The corpse wore a PRISM technician's uniform. It raised a cloud of dust as it hit the undulating floor.

Tensed for more attacks, he crouched, scanning the area. Feeling his way through their base. His nervous system balked at their presence. They were still here. Many.

He glanced back at Adam and realised that his friend was dead. The head was still, the gripping hand splayed. No life-light gleamed in the eyes. Nelson sprawled like a discarded doll.

The Indestructible Man looked down at the blood on his own arm. Adam's blood.

He had to go through with this. Nothing else left.

He slid away from the rubble that had fallen and crushed Nelson. God only knew how the internal pressure and oxygen was maintained. Stars gleamed through blast holes in the roof.

Flexing the muscle in his left wrist, he slid the Activator into his palm. The weight on his back seemed heavier. The device.

Unbidden, a strange memory thrust itself into his conscious mind. Something from his school days. A summer's day. A big building in a park. No, not a park. Grounds. The grounds of Winchester Cathedral, Hampshire, England. That huge, heavy, stone cathedral. Why that, now?

Something growled in the dust-choked gloom. His senses prickled. Dust sifted. Rock slid.

Adam raised his head. He was grinning.

'Not him!' shouted the Indestructible Man. He felt the anger course through him - good, strong, human anger.

The thing that filled Adam Nelson's body bared yellow teeth. Sightless eyes glared red.

He felt the warmth of its hatred. Felt all their hatred. And their fear.

At last, after all this time: their fear.

It ends tonight.

It ends now.

The Indestructible Man squeezed.

PART ONE
AD 2096

When he could, Commander Hal Bishop still drove to work. The world hadn't deteriorated that much.

His car was a low-slung, tan Aston Martin, the final model rolled off the now silenced production line. A sleek, curvaceous racer.

Bishop gunned the engine along the wooded back-roads of Berkshire. Through Maidenhead and on to the relatively clear tracks of the M4, the last functioning motorway in Britain. He put his foot down as he shot past the distant smoking ruins of Windsor and Slough, beneath the skeletal bridges of the defunct M25. Bishop enjoyed these last possible bursts of speed.

The weather was wet and weak in a dismal autumn. Twenty years living here and Bishop still couldn't get used to England. He pined for the Los Angeles sun.

The car was armoured but, despite that, his advisors still quaked whenever he spoke about driving. About having a home in the country as opposed to the relative safety of SILOET headquarters. Bishop needed the peace and tranquillity of Britain's frosty countryside. He enjoyed looking through his French windows out to the woods. Looking helped him think. He'd been there a fortnight, ostensibly on leave. Alex had been right. He'd needed it.

The calm of the bungalow was worth the risk of the journey in. Twice, bandits had blocked him. Both times he'd rammed his way through.

He had been thinking about his bungalow, about how he needed to repair the security camera on the perimeter gate, when the call had come through. Get back to SILOET, red alert.

The weak sun failed to penetrate the smoky tints on his windscreen, so Bishop removed his shades. He flicked a

switch on the dashboard; his steel blue eyes fixed on the road ahead. He was moving past Heathrow. There were some reports that the City had been making a move to reactivate the airport. Reports that he was going to have to have checked out.

The Com Officer's well-modulated tones were precise. 'Commander Bishop. The scavengers are enroute to SILOET. ETA - 1220 hours. Confirm, two males and a female. IDs not yet established. No explanation for how they came to be on board SKYHOME.'

Bishop watched his own determined face in the rear-view. He looked troubled. He was blushing under his severe blond crew cut. The old giveaway.

'I want a full isolation procedure,' he ordered. 'I don't want anything left to chance. They don't get anywhere until we know they're clean. I'll be there in forty minutes.'

'MIC.'

As Bishop reached the pot-holed ruins of Chiswick and began to pick his way up to Shepherd's Bush, he realised he was breathing heavily. He felt his heart beat hard inside his chest. Not surprising. Something new had occurred. He was getting excited. Dangerous. He concentrated on controlling his metabolism. This situation needed a cool head. As he drove closer to the Centre, Bishop unclipped his pistol, ready for trouble.

Once his car was stored safely in the underground car park, Bishop made his way through the barriers to the Television Centre. Still impressive, the Centre's bulk and curvature were a reminder of a bygone, greater age.

A crude banner stretched across the reinforced double doorway. 'BRITISH FILM AND TELEVISION CORPORATION' - an amalgam of the last gasps of public broadcasting money. Bishop didn't spare the sign a second glance as he strolled past the guards employed to look like receptionists, security staff and visitors. He waved aside the various 'Mornings'. He had business to attend to, not this sham.

It was amazing to reflect that, despite the whole BFTV operation being an expensive con (the corporation hadn't produced anything original or interesting in decades), there were still sufficient layabout 'creatives' who kept burdening them with CVs and proposals and pitches. How did they live? And where?

All this of course necessitated a costly and pointless exercise in sham meetings and a mountain of rejection letters.

Bishop tried to ignore this, as he did every time he came through reception, but he was still sufficiently irritated by the utter banality of it all that he was forced to control his breathing once more. He lit a thin cigar to help, puffing blue smoke through three more security checkpoints.

Finally, Bishop strode along the corridor to 'S' block and composed himself. Forget about the facade, who's left to bother breaching it? Bishop smiled to himself. Yeah. Who?

He had more pressing problems to attend to. But he wouldn't let them consume him just yet. He wanted the enjoyment of his morning drive to linger a little longer.

His office was locked, of course, and the reception area empty. Bishop gripped the cigar between his teeth and smiled at the freshly mounted nameplate on the oak door. HAL BISHOP - DIRECTOR GENERAL. Alex Storm's idea of a joke, no doubt.

The door hummed under a wave from Bishop's hand and he strode in.

It was just as he had left it. A simple room, a handful of movie posters on the walls, a filing cabinet and a desk. A decanter of whisky. Oh, and an ashtray. *The* ashtray.

He was back. And maybe this time it really was kicking off.

Deep down inside SILOET, the staff were on red alert. Bishop patrolled the sensor arrays.

The great cabinets, with their whirring tape machines, were recording and analysing all incoming data. Everything that could be monitored was being monitored. Nothing could get through the net. So Bishop had always thought.

Thank God Alex had been on duty. He trusted his number two with his life and that was the only reason he hadn't ordered a helicopter to come and fetch him from his bungalow straight away.

Bishop stared at the spinning spools, trying to clear his mind. He blocked out the bustle of his operatives as they checked and re-checked monitors, focusing solely on the spinning tapes. Lycra-clad women sat calmly at terminals, issuing steady streams of orders into microphones.

Could *they* be back? Really?

If so, why SKYHOME? There was nothing up there but junk.

He sensed Alex behind him, ever-present clipboard in hand. Bishop nodded to himself. Facts. He needed facts.

'Okay Alex,' Bishop said to the terminals. 'What have we got?'

At last he turned, taking in Alex Storm's pockmarked, brutal face. A face that hid a searing intelligence. Oh, and a psychotic homicidal personality.

Alex smiled. 'Relaxing holiday?'

'I know, I know,' Bishop replied. 'Always the way. Never go on leave. Something always happens when you go on leave.'

Niceties over. 'Now tell me. Who are these intruders? And how the hell did they get up on SKYHOME?'

'We don't know. That's the answer to both questions. But we got 'em, whoever they are. They're in a jet on their way down right now ETA two hours.'

Bishop nodded. 'Just how did we get them?'

'I triggered a stun alert. As soon as contact was lost, I ordered an immediate spring clean.'

Spring clean, thought Bishop. Automatic nerve gas sprinkler system. A blanket spray that knocks out every living thing on board for six hours. Time enough to land a retrieval jet.

'What about SEWARD? Did we detect anything?'

Alex shook his head emphatically. 'Nothing moving out there but planets.'

‘I don’t understand,’ said Bishop. ‘What were they doing there?’

Alex shrugged. He looked down at his clipboard. ‘It seems they were repairing the air conditioning.’

Bishop spent the next two hours thinking. He felt haunted, constantly revisiting his own past, looking for clues.

His own brush with the invaders never went away. It was while he was still a captain in PRISM, very young, very inexperienced. Pictures ran through the projector of his memory - his wife coming at him with the scissors, the sharp pain in his stomach, her intractable efforts to cut the suitcase from his wrist. His own punches and finally her prone body where he’d pummelled her with the ashtray. Her blood leaking into the carpet, mingling with his own. The ashtray that sat in his fake office upstairs. The ferocity of her attack was tremendous. Did she know what she was doing? Had she known? Had Helen had anything of herself left?

The world was dying. He knew it, deep in his heart. The Myloki may have gone away, but they had won. They had taken something. Humanity’s belief, even perhaps their arrogance, that they were the toughest, most resourceful and intelligent life forms in the universe. Stage by stage, the world was giving up. Bishop felt like a priest performing the last rites - the old and useless rituals.

He tried to dismiss these negative thoughts. They served no function. Everything that could be known about the Myloki was known. Only two components of their living presence remained on Earth. One was safely locked away never to be freed. The other...

God knows, thought Bishop. God knows.

His desk communicator warbled. Immediately Bishop sat up.

‘Alex?’

‘The jet is landing, Commander. They’re here.’

The cylindrical monoliths that comprised the BFTV Centre loomed over a circular recreation area, complete with

benches, bushes and concrete walkways. This area was never used and had grown into a broken playground adorned with a carpet of paper, broken paving stones and rotten office furniture.

The blank windows of the deserted high-rise offices stared down at the recreation area like the multifaceted eyes of a fly. A weak winter sun caught the glass on the western side, flaring a watery yellow burst of light. And then, as one, the eyes seemed to slowly draw themselves shut. Alloy shutters lowered themselves, shrieking, over the glass. The windows went dark.

Somewhere beneath the paving slabs, a muffled, mechanical groaning started up.

The recreation area cracked down the middle. With a protesting shriek it split into semi-circles and giant hydraulic arms folded the two halves into the ground. The rubbish and slurry that littered the surface slid off into the dark space below.

With a final echoing click, the process ceased. A great black hole now gaped where the recreation area had once been.

In the distance: the roar of a jet engine.

The SILOET Transporter jet dropped from the sky at a frightening speed. It was a bulky, blue bird of an aircraft - a fat miniature Concorde. As it approached the BFTV Centre its four VTOL engines twirled on their gyros to point straight down. The exhaust from the motors blasted dust from the walls of the surrounding Centre's buildings. The Transporter reared up, its beaked nose rising as the aircraft fought gravity. Three sets of bulky wheels emerged from its belly. Engines screaming, the plane manoeuvred and lowered itself into the space recently vacated by the shifting concrete plates.

Landing lights flared up as the plane dropped into the hole. It settled comfortably on to the reinforced landing pad. The pilot cut the engines and the roaring noise became a piercing dying whistle. Overhead, the hydraulic arms pushed the recreation area back into place. The whole operation had taken less than three minutes.

Acceptable, thought Bishop as he watched from the monitor in his office. But the beating of his heart gave him away. Watching the circus rolling again, that was more than acceptable. That was thrilling.

Dangerous emotions.

He flicked his intercom switch. He took a deep breath, thinking before he spoke.

'Tell the crew to stand down. Alex, I'm coming over.'

The jet still whined with the effort of landing. Ground crew swarmed round the arrow-shaped craft, connecting refuelling pipes and carrying out their safety checks. Bishop rose up from the hydraulic elevator into the stink of engine oil and warm metal.

Alex nodded and Security Chief Bain dispersed his team across the landing bay, SMGs at the ready. Bishop was heartened by their efficiency - veterans from the war, disciplined and experienced. These were soldiers who had faced the Myloki.

The landing ladders were wheeled into position and the fuselage doors opened.

Who were these people? Bishop couldn't help but wonder. How had they got up there with *no one* noticing?

The flight crew emerged, helmeted. Oxygen masks dangled from their chins. They waved at Bishop. Billy Kato and his team. Some night for them. Alex had scrambled them from the aircraft carrier *Stalker* out in the Pacific. They had done a good job, too. If all this turned out to be a false alarm then the least they would get out of the situation was a genuine red-alert drill.

All of a sudden, Bishop had the nagging itch that something had gone horribly, horribly wrong. The technicians were wheeling out the iso-tanks containing the trespassers, pumping tranquillisers into their blood. Isolated until retrieval. The Myloki could overwhelm on the slightest contact.

Every precaution. So why the feeling he'd slipped up somewhere? He looked at Alex. There was sweat on his upper lip.

'Yeah,' said his number two. Knowing. Bishop snapped a finger at the security team. 'Move in!'

Bishop broke into a run. The squad swarmed in on the three coffin-shaped tanks. Melting ice broke and ran from the glass lids. He smeared the water away and wiped the casing.

He clicked fingers at the masked security chief. 'Red alert. Now.'

Staring up from inside the glass, sleeping peacefully, was Billy Kato.

Bishop had been slack.

The first thing he should have done when the flight crew hadn't headed straight for decontamination was locked the place down. It had been too long; he was going rusty.

Bain punched the radio switch on his chest armour. All lights in the headquarters flashed twice. No klaxons, no swirly red lights. The staff knew what that signified. Alex hauled out his pistol and then the bomb went off.

For a second, Bishop had the chance to feel despair at being so easily outwitted.

A whoosh of pressure billowed out from the plane's belly and a perceptible wave of hot air swatted him over. He hit the hard floor and rolled, up again in an instant, wondering whether there was any time to do anything. Blinking, he stared up as a great cloud burst over them all.

'Gas! Gas!' bellowed Alex, and that was the last thing Bishop remembered.

Extract from *Message is Clear* by Neville Verdana. Published by Global Freedom Press, 2070.

Once, I thought I would live forever.

Perhaps the definition of adulthood is that first realisation, that moment when you know you won't. Everyone has their time in Eden but, like life, it ends.

For me, I was very young, perhaps nine. My father owned a small house near the sea. At sunset, to avoid bedtime, I would climb down the cliff path on to a small flat piece of Barbados rock that jutted out over the lapping waves of the Caribbean. The glorious sun would sink and I would wait for the pale orange of the sky to turn azure, then dark blue. Then I would look up to the moon and the stars.

For as long as I remembered, that black velvet vista had been my friend. A gentle blanket with glowing studs and one cool grey orb. The stars and moon seemed to look down on me and smile. They were watching over me, I thought. They enjoyed my nine-year-old successes and frowned, mock-mortified by my many, many mistakes.

The world had just become secular - by UN decree - but in real life almost everybody still believed that there was someone up there looking out for mankind. Certainly in my small world, which consisted of the village and the beach and the occasional trip to Bridgetown, everyone still held true to the Christian rituals. The church was a place of fun, singing and worship, and big women bringing rich food for the parties - not the airless ceremonies practised in Europe. So, I guess I did think there was someone there, call it God, call it whatever, who was looking down on young Neville, and keeping a benevolent eye on him.

Only this one night, whilst my father restructured his subsonic simulations on his computer, refining the electronic toys that had made us rich, I looked up at the stars and moon and I started to think about the people in the village. The fishermen in their old boats who worked the ocean. The gulls shrieking in their cliff nests. The sea itself, the cliff upon which I lay. And I wondered: how long does this last?

I felt I couldn't change, that I would always be myself at *this* moment, lying on the flat jutting rock. This moment that was so

rich, so detailed, so textured. I had so many thoughts and emotions fighting for space in my head. And yet, I knew it would end.

How? How could this moment just stop without leaving a trace?

Even five minutes into the future it would all have diminished, reconfigured. The hardness of the rock, the air and wind on my skin, the smell of the ocean. So concentrated, so complex.

Where did all this I was now seeing and feeling ultimately end up? Was it information to be stored in some eternal databank? When would that data be needed?

Which is when I realised that the answer could be never. I looked up at the night sky and instead of a friendly, parental blanket, it just seemed empty. All this scenery hadn't been put here for my benefit. I was here on sufferance. Less, it didn't even notice me at all.

I was gripped by an icy suffocating panic. I felt so helpless. Surely there was something I could do, someone I could go to? But no. There was no one. Nothing.

I might have lain there for that five minutes more, I don't remember. I do know I must have left, for it's all gone, along with the fisherman and the people in the village. The sea is there, but when the Earth finally dries up and dies of cold, that will be gone too.

Listen, I was nine and the moment passed. I was off playing cricket the next day, or swimming for crabs or learning how a radio wave worked or something that's much more important to a young kid. But as an adult I remember. Not the date or the time, but the feeling. The feeling of being utterly alone.

You may be wondering why I decided to include this cheery anecdote. My cop out answer is this: it just feels right. Considering the subject of this book.

The war against the Myloki began in AD 2066 and ended in AD 2068. That much we know. Everything else is blurred, out of focus.

This book, as much as anything else, is my own attempt to understand the events of those fateful years. Years that saw the inhabitants of this planet come as close to annihilation as at any other time in our history. A clandestine war even now shrouded in mystery.

We're all affected by the war, whether we know it or not. And it's going to take a lot more than this humble tome to get a handle on that.

We're all affected by the war and by something else, too. A by-product of that war. And this by-product may be the most profound element of them all. For on this Earth exists a human imbued, through no fault of his own, with one of the most powerful, profound abilities imaginable.

This man, for he is a man, walks, sleeps and eats like the rest of us. He isn't any stronger than us, nor cleverer, nor more impervious to pain. None of these things.

What he is, is immortal.

Yes. This man will live forever. He cannot die.

Think about that for a while. Take some time. Imagine.

If this book is about anything, it's about him. Or, more accurately, about the relationship between him and a once-young man from Barbados. A once- young man who fought for his planet as best he could. Who did his bit. And now has to cope with victory.

II

The conference room was stark and efficient, just the way he liked it. The furniture consisted of a flat, rectangular table with functional chairs. One wall was hung with a split-screen video monitor. That was it - bar the refreshments.

Bishop straightened his pale suit and walked in. In his hand he carried a briefcase, the same briefcase his wife had tried to cut from him over thirty years ago. Like the ashtray, a reminder.

The twelve highest-ranking SILOET officers were waiting for him.

‘Gentlemen,’ he said, standing in front of them. ‘It has been thirty years since the end of the Myloki war. It is strongly probable that they have, in some form or another, returned.’

Bishop didn’t wait for a reaction, he didn’t need to. They would all be feeling the same emotion. Fear. ‘I’m turning over the details of this briefing to Colonel Storm.’

Alex nodded and stood. He marched around the table to the screen. He was unfazed by the attention he was getting. He couldn’t have expected otherwise. His face was grey under the shine from the video-screened heads on the wall.

‘At 1420 hours yesterday,’ Alex began, ‘three intruders penetrated both SKYHOME and our headquarters here in London. How they overcame the most sophisticated radar net ever built is unknown. Their overpowering of the SKYHOME security system is regrettable but understandable. The disabling of the SILOET retrieval crew and the ease of their breach of the heart of our organisation is profoundly worrying.’

He looked at Bishop, hating what he was saying.

‘It appears we have been lax, gentlemen,’ said Bishop. ‘The years have made us soft.’

There was a murmuring amongst the delegates. It was the worst news. After all this time.

‘What happened to the intruders?’ asked Colonel Martin, his face looking pale and haunted on the video-link. He was head of the Pacific Arm and had been in charge of the STALKER and Billy Kato.

‘One was shot and killed while trying to escape,’ said Alex. ‘Another seriously wounded. The wounded one and the third intruder, a woman, disappeared into West London. We have patrols out searching for them now.’

‘What did they want?’ asked Martin.

Alex looked at Bishop. That was the question. ‘We don’t know. No SILOET personnel were harmed and as soon as they arrived in the Transporter, they effected their escape. Current thinking is that this was a diversionary tactic, a distraction from some kind of plan of which we are currently unaware. The physiology of the dead man was not human.’

Alex had tried to throw that last comment away, bury it. He did not succeed. Gravely, he excused himself and sat down.

Bishop waited for some minutes while his colleagues digested the information.

When the mutterings subsided, he stood and took command.

‘Gentlemen, we are facing some hard facts. Let us start with our organisation. Thirty years ago, the Earth was a rich and technologically superior planet. Internal strife and divisions had been almost entirely overcome, as had the pernicious superstition of religion. We had defeated a new ice age - a symbol of our power over nature. Space exploration had united the human race and solved many of our problems of overcrowding and famine. Perhaps this period will be seen by future generations as the pinnacle of human society. Our “golden age”.’

He paused, aware they were wondering where this was going.

‘Perhaps we drew attention to ourselves,’ he continued. ‘After all, we know the Earth has increasingly been seen as ripe fruit for a number of extraterrestrial races and beings we

can barely comprehend. PRISM grew out of a number of worldwide security organisations with experience in resisting such “attempts”. Thanks to the technological breakthroughs of the Sharon Consortium, PRISM had a wide range of toys at its disposal, and the cheap and easy means to maintain them. Hence, such novelties as Lunar Base, SKYHOME and SEWARD.’

Bishop allowed himself a softer moment: a small, wry smile.

‘And then,’ he said, ‘almost as a result of our success, came the Myloki. Doctor Koslovski?’ Bishop indicated one of the nehru-suited delegates. The chosen man, small and ferret-faced, was perspiring profusely.

Koslovski stood. He licked his lips, unused to addressing this number of high rankers at one time. His eyes were small and moist, his accent Russian.

‘As you may know, I supervised efforts to understand the Myloki - to uncover their motives and find an effective weapon to defeat them.’

‘And?’ came a voice from a video-link. Bishop couldn’t tell whose.

Koslovski blushed. ‘Yes. Current thinking believes they may be... *gestalt* race, a single entity controlling a... a...’ His English failed him.

‘Thank you, Doctor,’ Bishop interjected. ‘Let me spare you the agony. The fact is, gentlemen, we know nothing about the Myloki, apart from their capabilities as regards their attacks on ourselves. They built some kind of base on the moon, which was destroyed on first contact, which then subsequently regenerated. They can control human minds and bodies. They can duplicate complex organic DNA chains and improve them. Duplicate people. Although for some reason, they only did this twice. As you know.’

Bishop continued, waiting for an interruption that never came, ‘We have no idea why they were on the moon or why they would wish to conquer the Earth. We have no understanding of their physical composition, if indeed they have one. We don’t know why they went away and, until now,

we had no idea whether they would come back.’ He glanced at the awkward Koslovski. ‘With all due respect to you and your team, Doctor.’

The perspiring man muttered to himself. There had been no rebuke in Bishop’s words. Koslovski had been asked the impossible.

‘But now they have come back,’ said Martin.

‘It appears so. And all those wonderful facilities I spoke of earlier, that “golden age” of technology... well, it’s gone. Our victory came at a price. The Myloki were defeated but the Earth was broken. Economically ruined and drained of natural resources. We can expect no help from our space colonies, if indeed they have established themselves. If the Myloki have returned, the question is: how are we going to stop them this time?’

Bishop looked around. The room was entirely silent. He wasn’t surprised.

PART TWO
SIX MONTHS LATER

III

He was in space, staring at the Earth. The bright blue globe grew smaller as he moved away from it. Blackness drew a ring round the planet as it diminished. He knew he was travelling at an immense speed yet the journey was so gentle, the distances so vast, it felt like slow motion.

He could hear nothing but a low, almost imperceptible harmonic - a tense, stellar vibration that pulled at the nerves, building up to some impossible far away climax. The Earth receded. The terrifying perspectives of space were opening up. The nothingness, the shapes, the sheer volume of empty space. Earth's moon rolled by, giant and grey at first, then shrunken and gone. The sounds altered, and he knew he was being summoned. The tones themselves were pulling him, cold and immense. The sound of infinity. The sound of the stars.

As he moved, the bright torch of the Earth's star moved into his line of sight. He was being pulled out of the solar system. His speed now must be incredible, but still there was no sensation.

The sounds increased in intensity. Even the sun had dwindled to a tiny point of light. He felt the noise filling him utterly, a deranged chorus of emotionless immensity - beyond description.

He wished he could see where he was heading because he was reaching his destination. A shape so big he could sense it from here. Something huge and remorseless - approaching, approaching. The sound through his body was so loud now as to be physically shaking him. A bass frequency so low it traversed dimensions.

A blast of the coldest, heartless sound and then it was on him. He sensed its intelligence, its sheer size - the sound boomed through him and tore into him - swamping him.

The medical laboratory was in night mode. Machinery hummed to itself, ghostly blue light turned faces into monochrome cartoons.

As Bishop entered, he saw the three medical team members clustered round a monitor.

His monitor.

‘What is it? What’s happened?’ he barked.

Doctor Koslovski looked up. In the light, his face looked even more weaselly. ‘I don’t know. Something new.’

The Patient lay asleep on three different video screens. Bishop suppressed his anger. How could someone so innocuous looking, so ragged, cause so much trouble?

The team wasn’t watching the monitors. They were studying the EEC. Digital lines crossed the screen like tracer fire. ‘Is it supposed to be that fast?’

Koslovski shook his head. ‘It’s going crazy. Brain activity like a racehorse but the metabolic functions are normal. Well, normal for him.’

‘Is he asleep?’

‘I don’t think he does sleep. Not in the way we understand sleep.’

Always something new, thought Bishop. And always something confusing.

Doctor Koslovski bit his lip. ‘Nurse, I think you must take vital signs please.’

The young uniformed nurse was unsettled. She looked down at the man in the bed. ‘Now!’ Koslovski snapped.

Jumping, the girl muttered an apology and scuttled out of the laboratory.

The second doctor, another woman, a grey-haired old bird called Ventham, was still staring at the EEG. ‘It’s regular. Like a pulse. I’m not sure it’s autonomic at all...’

Bishop decided it was time for the layman’s explanation. ‘Koslovski. Don’t tell me it’s another “something we’ve never come across”.’

Koslovski barely heard. He was deep in thought. ‘No. On the contrary. I think it may be - ‘

‘Be? Be what?’

Distracted, Koslovski dropped in front of a computer terminal. He tapped a few keys and waited for the tape spools to begin spinning. He hit a final button, then looked up. ‘Familiar, Commander Bishop. Familiar.’

There was a tremor in his voice that unsettled Bishop. On the screen, the Patient lay unaware of the fuss he was causing. The nurse re-entered, turning the scene into a late-night soap opera. She began to move round the sleeping figure.

‘I don’t know whether to be relieved or terrified.’ said Koslovski, as a printer chattered into life. One of the cabinets spat out a punch card. ‘I thought so. Look at this.’

Bishop glared at the freshly printed lines and numbers on the card. Prickles of cold. Why was his body suddenly exhibiting fear symptoms? ‘What is it?’

Koslovski snatched back the card. ‘EEG readings.’

Bishop didn’t understand. ‘The Patient?’

‘I would like to tell you, Commander, that I hope you are wrong in your suspicions about the Patient. That your career is in danger. For if you are right...’

‘What do you mean by that? What is this?’

Koslovski tapped the computer card. ‘Some time ago, medical thinking surmised that these patterns might be some kind of telepathic carrier wave. Like an open channel for the radio set.’

Bishop looked darkly at Koslovski. Then at Doctor Ventham, who shrugged. ‘How long ago?’

Koslovski placed the card on the table. ‘Thirty years,’ he said. ‘It was believed that these brainwaves were somehow the key to the link between men and... and Them. These readings were recorded when he was brought to SKYHOME all those decades past. They are the EEG readings of Captain Grant Matthews.’

‘Oh Christ; said Doctor Ventham.

Bishop dropped the file on to his desk. Frustration was starting to exhaust him. There was nothing more to be done.

Nothing he could do. He wished he could ease the knots in his stomach.

The physical pain was a reflection of all those psychic doubts nagging away at him. Six months on, there was still no answer to the mystery of the three infiltrators. If it had been a diversion, then whatever it was they were diverting SILOET's attention from was a success. Because there had been no break in the routine. None whatsoever.

In the meantime, he kept up with his various development projects, all exactly the same.

His scientists worked away with their dwindling resources, making little breakthroughs here and there. The patrols were unflinching at sea and on land. Lunar Base maintained readiness and SEWARD kept its lonely vigil in Jupiter orbit. A thorough audit had revealed nothing, nothing odd at all. Tension was dissipating. They were relaxing again and that was dangerous for everyone.

Had the Myloki returned? Really?

That was the only question that mattered, and Bishop didn't have a clue.

For the first time in six months, he thought about going home. And still his stomach hurt.

His intercom buzzed. 'Bishop.'

'The report is ready. You want to hear it?' Alex, down in the medical wing.

'Anything new?' asked Bishop.

'That's your job.'

Bishop smiled. The first time in a long while.

Riding the elevator down, he tried to clear his mind. Try and take in the facts as if new. Look out for snags, inconsistencies. Just something that made sense.

Who are you? Bishop wondered. Just who the hell are you?

He sipped coffee as he pushed his way through the plastic doors into decontamination. He was thoroughly sick of SILOET coffee. It wasn't as if it was the real thing. And the caffeine made his heart bounce.

Alex pulled off his glasses as Bishop walked in. The old war-horse was vain, even now. Bishop had always thought that would be the real identity check for Alex Storm. If his number two ever stopped taking off his glasses, or chatting up the new women, he'd definitely been got at.

The file was thick. It took Bishop an hour to read. More coffee and Alex pacing up and down the waiting room, smoking his cigars.

Bishop rubbed his eyes. He yawned.

'So what's new?' Alex asked.

Bishop stared down at Koslovski's report. 'It's incredible and mundane all at the same time. And provides absolutely no answers.'

Alex ambled to the viewing window. Bishop stood up and followed. Dr Koslovski was making one of his interminable checks. He lifted the eyelids of the Patient on the table and shone a light in.

Bishop noticed Alex glancing slyly at him. This was going to be a test. The old double act.

'A man takes a bullet in the head,' said Alex. 'It passes right through the frontal lobe, smashing through the skull before embedding itself into a concrete landing plate. I know. I dug it out.'

Bishop nodded. Permission to continue.

'A fatal wound. Except it's not fatal. We bring him down, noting the hole in his head, irretrievable brain damage and spinal trauma. Also, a broken nose, jaw, right femur and collar bone, all the result of falling from a significant height on to a metal platform. Bleeding minimal, thank god, because it turns out he's not human and we don't have matching blood for a transfusion. He's dead but not dead.'

Bishop just stared. Through the window, Koslovski completed his useless checks and pulled off his surgeon's mask.

Alex kept on. 'It appears some kind of internal self-healing mechanism is triggered by the injury because for some unknown reason his DNA goes haywire. It starts to rewire itself from the ground up. Our man Doctor Koslovski, that

leading world expert in what we pitifully call xeno-biology, pumps him full of something or other gleaned from Myloki Shiners and stabilises the patient. The DNA doesn't stop rewinding. Every time we block the process, it starts it off all over again. In the meantime, after some fancy surgery, the bones begin to heal themselves, fantastically quickly. Even the brain, undoubtedly damaged beyond all repair, repairs. It grows back. Finally the rewiring stops. We don't know why. Brain activity comes back. The patient is alive but comatose. We put out a cover story that he's dead and we've just cut up an alien in an autopsy.' Alex paused. 'Six months later, he's still in a coma. End of story.'

Bishop stared at the Patient. 'And we're none the wiser. We know nothing,' he muttered.

'We know one thing,' said Alex.

Bishop turned.

Alex was also looking through the viewing window. 'We know of two other men who can't die. And neither us nor God made them that way.'

Extract from *Message is Clear* by Neville Verdana

How did the war begin?

The truth is that we may have brought it upon ourselves.

It appears that while we were busy sending colony ships to distant stars, mapping Mars and wondering whether people could live in the asteroid belt, we found something that we appeared to have overlooked. Something on our doorstep. Something on our own moon.

When I was told this, the war had already started, though you wouldn't know it. Oh, there were indications that wouldn't have passed you by. The occasional water supply poisoned, rather a lot of problems with our space programme, vital social control systems collapsing at just the wrong time. And people, important people, going missing without any explanation. But that's for later.

I had been headhunted from my research post at Gothenburg University, inducted on to the PRISM crash-training programme. All under a cloak of (what seemed at the time) amusing secrecy. I found myself on board an unlikely gravity-defying metal box in the air called SKYHOME, in a lab full of like-minded trainee communications technicians. I was busily engaged in deciphering the mathematics of new hypothetical forms of radio waves. Waves far more complex than anything previously thought possible. Of course, I soon realised these waves were not hypothetical.

It was Captain Martin who briefed my class in the origin of the war. We were hauled out of our sound-lab one day and into the SKYHOME lecture hall. He stood and waited for us, on the stage, framed in front of a large telescreen. My colleagues and I shuffled in our seats, enjoying the break in routine. It wasn't the first time I'd seen a PRISM captain in the flesh - colour-coded body suit (Martin's was ochre), peaked hat, boots and all, but I had always considered the uniform unnecessarily bulky. Funny, even. Until he played us the sound.

'At 0652 hours, on the 3 March 2068,' he said, and I remember his words as if it were yesterday, 'this signal began to emanate from the Sea of Tranquillity on the moon. It was detected by Lunar Base and believed to be a freak natural phenomenon.'

Captain Martin nodded at the technician up in the gallery. A transistorised cassette player clicked in.

I will never be rid of the memory of the first time I heard their cold, alien noise. The radio waves made flesh.

How could this sound be? How could it exist?

‘A signal,’ said Martin. ‘To us.’

We were frozen, stunned, as we endured a kind of burble, the like of which is beyond description but was as cold as the stars themselves.

Captain Martin nodded again and the cassette player clicked off.

The next morning, everybody who had been in that room reported we had all shared a night of terrible dreams. Sometimes I still get them.

Why was it so frightening?

It was the voice of something trying to sound human.

The lights dimmed. The telescreen brightened. I heard the flickering of a projector.

‘What you are about to witness is classified PRISM ultra-violet top secret; Martin said. ‘You must never reveal the contents of this film to anyone.’

I am now about to disobey that order.

The film was on good quality videotape. The camera was the cabin-mount from the LEV (Lunar Expeditionary Vehicle) sent to investigate the signal. The picture was framed by flickering LED lights: instrumentation and monitoring systems.

It would have been a long, painstaking journey. Those tracked juggernauts were not built for speed. Nothing to look at except the bone-white dust on the surface and the sheer black immensity of space. Crew of three, if I remember my PRISM manuals correctly. I reckoned they had been out there ten days at least, living and sleeping in that computer- controlled cabin.

We watched the moon’s surface bump and pitch according to the movement of the LEV Every now and then the shadow of a crewman flitted across the glass of the windscreen. We heard voices, hard to make out and strangely mundane in contrast with the spectral, ashy surface on the screen.

‘Signal alignment - 32 by 16. “Check!” Number two motor rising point two degrees.’ ‘Status check on weapons bay.’ ‘Chicken again. Can’t they think of anything else...’

The crew is surprisingly calm. I later hear that Captain Taylor was a seasoned space explorer. This was why he was sent. He always stayed cool.

And then, through the camera's eye, I saw something. A disturbance in the vast dust bowl ahead. Something glinting. The crew notice it too.

The voices change. Emotion ratchets up a notch. 'Contact! Visual.' A pause. 'What is that?'

That was what we in the lecture hall were asking ourselves. Along with everyone else, I leant forward in my seat, straining to try and focus in on - what? What was it out there in that dust?

Of course the object, or building, or whatever it was, was the same skull grey of the moon's surface. Of course it was partly submerged, or buried or whatever, and the hobbling camera didn't help. But there was something else. Something blurred about it. An angle, a curve of the lunar light or... I couldn't tell. The landscape seemed to flicker, one moment it was gone, the next a crazy hodgepodge of lines and forms seemed to stretch up like a spire and it was as if something gigantic loomed over the LEV.

The voices in the cabin were quiet. Later, I could admire their dedication. They could still concentrate on their job, rather than allow themselves to be numbed by whatever sensation had gripped me. The vehicle rolled slowly across the plain. I felt *I* was on the moon, naked under the stars.

'I think they're buildings - under the surface!' comes an excited voice.

'How can they be moving?'

'Computer scans concur. It's below the line, whatever it is.'

'Energy build-up dead ahead. Type unknown...'

At last, Captain Karl Taylor stands up. The top of his hard black cap emerges just at the bottom of the frame. He is clearly glaring out at the moonscape.

'Energy build up?' he barks. 'Are they preparing weapons?' A strong voice, used to command.

'God knows...' comes a technician's reply.

Something flashes. A flash revealing... possibly could have been... some kind of pyramid?

'Deploy missiles, quickly!' Captain Taylor orders.

'MIC!'

And then the sound hits them. Only this time it is total, overwhelming. The LEV camera vibrates violently and the low

rumble causes everyone in the lecture hall to flinch in repulsion. The unearthly, cold moan. Unforgiving, infinite, the voice from the stars. The sound of despair. It is as if a hurricane has gripped the vehicle.

I heard the crew screaming and crying out.

Taylor's cap drops from the frame. He bellows, 'Fire! Fire!' and suddenly the LEV is rocked by a new blast and we see two plumes of flame streaking towards the distant object.

The sound is burning our ears (God knows what it was doing to Taylor's LEV crew) when the missiles hit and there is a huge, silent, dusty explosion.

The sound cuts off. Abrupt.

The cabin camera steadies itself and stares fixedly at the growing dust cloud dead ahead.

'Did we hit it?' asks a voice.

'Readings. Give me readings,' says Taylor, still in control.

'Energy has dissipated. There's nothing happening there.'

'So we destroyed it?'

'I don't know.'

Another long pause. Unbelievably, the LEV is still rolling along. The dust cloud hangs in the air. Its slow-motion ballooning seems unnatural, wrong to any watching human eyes. The moon's lower gravity: turning the explosion into a special effect.

'Captain,' asks a technician, 'What was that?'

'Keep scanning,' Captain Taylor cuts him off. 'Are the communications still online?' These are the last words he utters.

'Yes, Captain,' comes the second technician's voice. 'Lunar Base is getting this...'

And then the final moment, suddenly upon them. There's no timing, no dramatic pauses. It's just on them.

As far as I can make out, something joined them in the cabin. The camera remains fixed, unblinking and still on the growing dust. But the voices are odd. Terror has overwhelmed the crew.

'Christ! What's that? *Captain!*'

'It's in here! What's it doing to him?'

Shadows move. Silence. The LEV stops. The camera remains trained on the pale lunar surface. On the dust.

IV

He was aware of himself. He had returned.

He was lying in a hospital bed. Bright lights, too bright. No focus - just shadows and movement. The pain was too much. Leave it there. Leave.

The EEG kicked in. The electronic clatter made Bishop jump. He had taken to sitting in the observation lounge, observing. He liked to be near the little alien wired up inside the medical centre. The shift doctor, wrapped like a monk in his surgical gown and mask, dropped his clipboard.

Paper chattered noisily through spools. Jittery metal fingers drew angular pictures across wide graph paper. Bishop stood up, hand to his mouth.

‘How is he doing this?’ asked the doctor.

The next time, he was fully awake. The shock of consciousness was sudden, as if he had been thrown into an icy lake. The image made him giggle.

A masked man was staring down at him.

‘Hello,’ the Patient croaked.

The masked man’s eyes widened with shock. The Patient was confused; he was only trying to be polite. He tried to speak again but couldn’t. Words failed him. Nice pun that. Neat. He should remember that.

His throat was dry with disuse and the swelling choked him. He knew he might fall unconscious at any minute, so he had a good look around to remember. He felt plastic pads on his skull. Attached to wires. Crude probes to measure his brain energy. There was the echo of tremendous pain inside him, intense damage. Intense but not total. Not fatal. It seemed he had survived.

He had a very important task to perform. He had to know. Clouds of numbness were beginning to form in his head so he had to be quick. He looked around, agitated. Did they have one here? Any would do, even a tiny one.

He looked up - perhaps mask-face had one.

'What do you want?' asked mask-face, slowly as if to a child. Did he think he couldn't speak English? His throat was burning now, and the clouds were thick and heavy in him. He had seconds, that was all.

'What is it?' asked mask-face, utter bewilderment in his eyes.

Form the words. Form the words. Switch off the pain.

With a monumental effort he got it out. 'Mirror,' he said. And said it again before he felt himself falling into the dark.

'It is a bloody miracle,' said Koslovski.

The little Russian doctor was addressing Bishop and Alex in the Conference Room. Empty now, with the grey video-link blank like a stone slab. Bishop was nodding as if the medical man had said something profound.

Koslovski was out of his surgical garb and wearing an utterly tasteless yellow trouser suit, complete with cravat. Bishop could see it was all Alex could do not to laugh out loud.

Between the trio, laid out on the conference table, were all the reports, charts and diagrams relating to the mysterious alien they had captured all those months ago.

'The Patient', as he was officially badged, was out of his coma.

'His status, please,' said Bishop. He kept his voice tone low and calm. He wanted the notoriously eccentric Koslovski reined in, keeping it brief and to the point.

'He is physically completely recovered,' said Koslovski. 'That much I can tell you. I can't tell you how, or why he has two hearts, or why his blood is different to ours, or why his brain is wired utterly differently to that of a human being or how he got here or what he intended to do.'

‘Could he be...’ Alex seemed to search for the words, glancing at Bishop in the low light. ‘Could he be one of them? You know, an actual one?’

The sixty-four-million-dollar question, thought Bishop. Straight out.

‘If you mean is he Myloki then I honestly don’t know.’

Bishop sat back, chin in hand, trying to remain systematic. ‘Why did he want the mirror?’

Koslovski shrugged. The gesture was theatrical, affected. It irked Bishop. ‘Just took it and looked at himself. He seemed to be shocked when he saw his reflection.’

‘Why do you think that was?’

‘He said something. Very quiet due to dehydration of the throat. I barely heard him. He said he should have changed.’

Alex raised an eyebrow. ‘Changed? Changed what?’

The silence was the only possible sensible answer.

‘Can he talk now?’ asked Bishop. ‘I mean, is he lucid?’

‘It is incredible. Six months ago this man was dead. Irreparable brain damage - colossal damage. And now he is better. He sits in a wheelchair and looks around, as if he has no knowledge of anything, soaking up sensory input. I suspect he is phenomenally intelligent. Or a complete idiot. Sometimes he whistles.’

‘You’re joking,’ snorted Alex.

‘I do not joke about this,’ Koslovski replied, stung. ‘He whistles little tunes.’

‘Can he *talk*?’ Bishop was impatient. He couldn’t help himself.

‘I think he can, yes.’ Koslovski was nodding. ‘I just don’t think he wants to talk to me.’

Bishop authorised the transfer of the Patient from the medical wing to De-Programming. This was going to get specialised.

He remembered his training, his job as a strategist before the baton of command was passed to him. Colonel LeBlanc and his pearls of wisdom, the man like a cliché of the venerable old sage, all white hair and resonant voice. The

rule with captives was: 'Don't pre-empt, don't expect. You want them to surprise you. Just don't let them know that.'

Bishop lit another cigar. He watched the transfer on the monitors. Alex personally handled the move, a whole squad of SILOET security surrounding the jolly little man in the wheelchair, who seemed to enjoy the whole experience. He looked like a little kid, black hair hobbling, dark eyes brimming with excited emotion. But no words. None. Alex rolled him past the camera and into the complicated process that was the entry to De-Programming.

If he was a replica he was a damned good one. And he had to be, didn't he? The generation up from Matthews. The next mark.

Perhaps. But why make his physiology so different? So easy to spot?

Perhaps Alex was right when he voiced the question they were both thinking. Was the Patient a Myloki? Were they here at last, in person?

There was only one way to find out.

Slowly, deliberately, with no apparent hurry, Bishop smoked his cigar, stubbed it carefully out in his office-seat ashtray, then walked out of the room.

'I know you can understand me. Who are you?'

The little man looked at Bishop from his restraining chair. There wasn't much danger of physical attack, by rights he shouldn't be able to walk. But as Bishop knew, stranger things had happened.

If he was Myloki, then they were an odd-looking race. He looked more like a hospital porter... or a clown. A clump of straight black hair, hooded eyes and a protruding, almost childish lower lip.

The Patient took a deep breath and looked around. There was intelligence there, a deep trough of it. But you could overlook him in a crowd.

'You spoke when you first regained consciousness. In English. Speak to me now. Why did you ask for a mirror?'

Was it because you wanted to know what you looked like? What a human looked like?’

The Patient looked at Bishop. A flash of impish humour. Now that was surprising. Bishop suppressed a flash of rage. An urge to wipe that grin off his face.

‘I would like to know how you survived a bullet in the head. That’s quite a trick.’

The eyebrows raised in sympathy. Mock-sympathy.

‘You’re not human are you?’

A shake of the head. It was as if the Patient was enjoying this. He licked his lips. When he spoke, his voice was gentle but with steel under the surface.

‘I expected a different face.’

Bishop looked up at the camera in the wall. Alex was watching. Koslovski too. Everything the little man said would be analysed by computer. The trick was to exhume morality and conscience – the memory of a past life implanted like a dark seam underneath Myloki programming.

Their only weakness - they made their doubles too well. Given sufficient encouragement the blueprint of the real personality would surface. The old memories and emotions could be made to dominate. It had worked with Matthews.

Bishop wondered whether the Myloki had thought of that, and this time had implanted the personality of a buffoon.

‘What have you done with my friends?’

‘Friends?’

‘Friends. Did you shoot them too?’

‘Why did you expect a different face?’

The Patient yawned. He winced with pain. After all this, he had a headache?

‘I’m tired. Is this going to take long?’

‘That depends,’ said Bishop, ‘on whether you can tell me what I need to know.’

‘I’d love to help you. Really I would. But my memory isn’t what it used to be. I’m sure it’ll come back. After some sleep. Probably quite a lot of sleep, actually.’

‘I know you’re not an idiot,’ Bishop snapped. ‘So stop acting like one.’

The Patient closed his eyes. He looked almost as if he was going to drop into unconsciousness. Chin sunk into his chest, he muttered, 'I feel like I've changed. I should have. You must have found a chemical that blocked the process. How did you know?'

'Stop playing games.'

The eyes opened. He snapped in a fury that was almost comical. 'I have a right to know what kind of rubbish you're pumping into my body! It's outrageous!'

Bishop stood up. Too quickly. He had given himself away. The Patient flinched as if expecting to be struck. 'Well...' he blustered, 'I was only asking.'

'You're going to have to be cleverer than this,' said Bishop, under control again. 'I will get answers from you, by any means at my disposal.' A jumble of clichés, he knew and regretted saying them.

Suddenly, the Patient smiled. Utterly disarmed, Bishop stood still. The smile was warm, genuine. 'My dear fellow. I'm perfectly happy to answer any questions you throw at me.' In an instant he was glaring again. 'As soon as I see my friends. Until then, not a word!'

And with that he closed his eyes, went limp and started to snore.

Alex was watching him carefully over breakfast. He tried not to yawn. They were in the refectory and he didn't want the staff to think he was anything less than one hundred per cent. He liked the refectory. With its kitchen staff, orderly queues and trays, it felt to Bishop like the last bastion of civilisation. An odd philosophical thesis: the canteen as a symbol of higher culture. Discuss.

'You all right?' Alex asked.

Bishop smiled. 'That obvious?'

Alex looked down at his fried eggs and synthetic sausage. He liked a heart-attack breakfast - what did they call it? Traditional English.

Bishop nodded as the young waitress came over to refill his coffee. He stared into the liquid's murky brown depths. He

noted his 2IC's inevitable wink at the girl. She smiled and wandered away. In another life, another time, she would probably have been a model. One of the perks of SILOET: you were the richest, safest organisation left on Earth and could take your pick of who you employed.

'You going to try again today?' asked Alex.

Bishop looked up. 'Do you think he's... one of them? Honestly?'

Alex licked his fork clean; placed it carefully on the plate then lit a cigarette. You don't want to know what I think.'

'Come on. I'll take anything you can give me.'

'I read a file once. Long time ago. When I was just starting out...'

'This is going to be a long story.'

Alex shrugged. 'You asked.'

'Well?'

'Something I found in Records. On a job.'

Bishop imagined Alex thirty years ago, and the 'jobs' he was asked to perform. He had got to know him so well over the years that he found himself shocked at the remembrance of Alex Storm's history. This was the man Bishop probably knew the most in the world, but it was so easy to forget what was really there, held inside the cool exterior.

'PRISM was still getting established,' Alex said. 'I was in charge of the transfer of documents from the old UN taskforce to us. Computerised mainly, that was the easy bit. But there was some paper stuff, very old. Very odd.'

Bishop sat back in his seat. It wasn't like Alex to be so forthcoming. Where was this leading?

'I had the feeling they hadn't disked the stuff because they were embarrassed. But someone felt strongly enough to keep the original documents. Perhaps, just in case. I read through them, out of interest really. A week after I'd found them, they had gone. Dropped into the shredder by some ignorant clerk, apparently. To "save space".'

'What were they about?'

Alex took a deep drag on his cigarette. He looked embarrassed himself. Well, at least uncomfortable.

'History,' he said. 'Events in the twentieth century. Different takes on some of our most cherished near-disasters. Startling takes. For example, you remember that asteroid that was supposed to have almost hit us back in the twentieth?'

Bishop did. A real close call, apparently. 'What did they call it? The Mondas Asteroid?' What else? Something about an Antarctic base. 'So what really happened?' asked Bishop.

'The papers refer to some uncomfortable observations concerning this "asteroid". It was big. Very big. The topography too. It was all a little too familiar. Not only that. Something came over. We were... visited.'

'You're joking.'

'It was there in black and white.'

'Didn't the asteroid disintegrate before hitting the atmosphere?' asked Bishop, trying to recall long-distant history lessons.

'That's right,' Alex leaned forward. 'But this is where it gets interesting. According to these notes, that disintegration was not accidental. It was... triggered. And someone on Earth triggered it. The official press statement is obvious nonsense - a claim that the asteroid went supernova of all things. Nobody was fooled, but the hype surrounding that claim managed to obscure the truth.'

'What's that got to do with our Patient?'

Alex dropped his cigarette on to his breakfast plate. He was smiling but there was no amusement on his pockmarked face. He stared at Bishop. 'Other events too, strange explanations for historical events where the official explanations don't really stand up to scrutiny. Something about the Post Office Tower in London. The rise and fall of International Electromatics. An evacuation of London. And through them all, one name that keeps popping up to save the day.'

Bishop didn't know what to say. What did this have to do with their man? Unless... unless... he was suggesting...

'What was his name?' he asked.

Before Bishop tackled the Patient again, he went through the security reports on events in the world outside SILOET. It had been a long time.

It appeared that the planet he was busy trying to save was crumbling under him. The Balkanised governments brought back to control individual nation states when inter-continental travel was discontinued were busy finding ways to hoard the last of their UN pickings. Civil war in France, Japan had invaded New Zealand, the North American Legion was once again fighting the Deep Southern States - with the Texas Republic throwing in nuclear weapons to the highest bidder. Africa had effectively depopulated itself when the specially bred maize crops swarmed like locusts across the continent, turning lush farmland back into the deserts from which they had been reclaimed.

Could the Patient be Earth's mysterious little helper? The whole idea was preposterous. Even Alex had given little or no credence to the notion. Except for one titbit. Something he had remembered from the destroyed documents. A note from the early days of UNIT. A report, from Lethbridge- Stewart himself. About a man in a hospital bed who had changed. Not through surgery or any invasive means but a complete structural alteration from the ground up. A man who somehow had the ability to change his physical appearance.

If only they'd had a name. Something to hang on to.

Or was the whole story a colossal red herring? Alex had thought so. He had apologised for putting the thought into Bishop's head.

Bishop shuffled through the files. He could only concentrate on the possible, the feasible. Perhaps Alex's probing had been designed to unsettle him. Give him a fresh overview of his command after these six months. Maybe it was time to head back to Berkshire.

No. Not yet. Not until every lead had been exhausted.

He thought about the two names the Patient had given him - his 'friends'. Last seen climbing out of the landing platform at SILOET headquarters. Another distraction or genuine concern? Did it matter?

Somehow these two had made it out of the Centre and into West London. Where one expected them to last less than a week.

He had men in the field around the Centre, active in the two dominant communities. He re-read their most recent reports, expecting nothing.

SILOET had got lucky.

Bishop separated the two reports that meant anything. He flicked his intercom switch. 'This is Bishop,' he said. 'Break out the MOVERs.'

By 1600 hours Bishop could do nothing but wait for news. He knew he was delaying his next appointment with the Patient but he didn't know why.

Koslovski reported that he had been conducting an Assisted Physiotherapy session - electronically stimulating the withered muscles atrophied during the coma. It was not entirely unexpected that the Patient was already eighty per cent recovered. Koslovski stated that the Patient had repeatedly asked for his companions.

Bishop waited for the lift. SILOET personnel greeted him as they bustled by. He barely acknowledged them, aware that Alex Storm was probably observing him.

The lift doors pinged open and he stepped inside. Once closed, Bishop typed a number into the control pad. A combination known only to him. Instead of going up to the Centre, the lift descended.

Once down on the secret level, Bishop navigated his way through a retina scan, handprint and visual check performed via camera by Professor Graham himself.

The final door, an impregnable metal cylinder that slid sideways, opened.

Bishop walked through and it slid shut again.

Professor Graham looked glum. No surprise there, he always looked glum. He had a face that was made to look glum. Pale and puffy, the bespectacled scientist always appeared to be on the verge of a rather apathetic suicide. Bishop knew better.

‘How are you down here?’ he asked.

‘Oh fine, fine,’ Professor Graham replied, unconcerned and almost uncomprehending of the question. He stared unblinkingly at the computer simulations in front of him. Bishop got the distinct impression that the man was irritated by the distraction.

‘What if I told you we might have a subject?’ Bishop resisted the urge to smile.

At last he had Professor Graham’s full attention.

PART THREE

Extract from *Message is Clear* by Neville Verdana

I could talk about what I did during the war. Up on SKYHOME, overseeing the global communications system for a top-secret organisation. I was a hero, make no mistake. But it's not me you're interested in.

I do not intend to write a list of every incident instigated by the Myloki. These episodes are documented elsewhere. They are full of incident, intrigue and a surprising number of victories for the PRISM organisation. Losses too. Oh yes, plenty of those.

No. My interest, and therefore my book, lies in the human ramifications of the attempted invasion. One particular human.

However, before we begin, I will make one observation and it is not as glib as it may at first appear. Let me ask you a question:

Why didn't the Myloki just scorch the Earth? Why didn't they just wipe it clean?

Why did they choose to conduct a war of terror instead, using possessed human agents as their tools?

Sounds stupid doesn't it? But it isn't really. In fact, it's the key question.

Because nobody knows why, although the PRISM xenopsychologists and policy-makers spent long enough trying to work it out. The only conclusion they could safely make was that somehow, the Myloki had to do it this way. They had no other choice.

V

Unable to sleep, Jamie often spent the nights on the armoured, netted roof of the Town Hall, looking out over the dingy ruin London had become. To the east he saw tower blocks, slabs of black light, long abandoned. And the Westwall, a twenty-foot-high slab of concrete stretching north to south, bisecting Hyde Park down to the river. A wall bristling with guns and wire. *Their* guns and wire. *Them*. The other side. It was called the City and was a total no-go.

However, it was to the west where Jamie most often turned. Past the terraced houses and parks he had pledged to protect. Beyond, in the direction of that unseen monstrous cylindrical building from which he had escaped but the Doctor had not.

As he stared, trying to envisage the TV Centre with its blank glass eyes, he found himself instead summoning up the image of the Safe Spot. The place he'd retreated to during those terrible weeks in the hospital. Instead of the blighted sprawl of buildings, he saw the glade. Instead of a city, Scotland. Up on the mountain near his village. He saw the cold sparkling loch in the summer light, the wide trees bending over it as if dipping for a drink. A fresh morning mist and the smell of village cooking in his nostrils. Himself as a boy, senses brighter, feelings simpler. The place he could go to block out the noise. To forget.

Jamie is frozen, immobilised by sheer disbelief. The Doctor's head, shoved inside the stolen flight helmet, has burst. He looks up at Jamie. There is a cracking sound and plastic shards shatter and fall. Blood floods the orange-tinted goggles and the Doctor lets go of the gantry ladder.

He seems to bang suspended, leaning back from the rungs, arms outstretched.

Jamie cannot see the dark, gentle eyes through the plastic lenses and blood.

Then Time returns and the Doctor drops. His limp body falls, with much slack-muscle crunching, on to a metal platform.

'Jamie!' screams Zoe, over his head. They wear flight uniforms. Uniforms of those who had captured them and they had outwitted. Helmets and oxygen masks for disguise.

'Shot,' says Jamie. 'They've shot the Doctor.'

He sees the men down on the ground by the plane, pointing up at him with their sticks and blooms of fire.

And then his own arm shatters in a spray of blood and bone.

Before the pain kicks in he rolls away from the ladder, on to the metal gantry with its window of daylight seeping through. He will not fall. His instinct for survival is too strong.

Then fire burns his right side, cauterising all reasoned thoughts.

He vaguely understands that Zoe is hauling him along the walkway, pressing a button, opening a hatch, but it is all a dream, not real at all. Because they've shot the Doctor.

He came down at dawn for Morning Prayer, aware that yet again he had been awake all night. This was dangerous to the organisation, inefficient. Further along the line, someone might have to rely on his alertness and Jamie could let them down through self-inflicted exhaustion.

So, prior to shoving open the fire door that led back into the corridors of the Town Hall, Jamie slid his blade from his belt sheath and carefully sliced a nick into his left forearm, just above the wrist. Blood dropped in cherry blobs on to the concrete floor. Jamie concentrated on the pain. Its numbing white fire was bliss.

Later, bandage applied, he reported for duty. Uniformed officers and staff hurried about their business, even at this early hour. The air was tight with the din of work and the day's orders over the loudspeakers. The industry was welcome. It brought Jamie back to the land of the living. He yearned to be given the chance to lose himself in the bustle.

The duty man, the Council Lieutenant who gave out the morning briefings, looked up from his clipboard. 'Macrimmon!' he barked from under his blue forage cap. 'Where have you been? You're wanted.'

His thoughts had become fragmented. He could no longer recall the events of his life in the order in which they had happened. It felt like he was trying to piece together someone else's story. The images remained, but somehow the emotions had become disconnected.

You like what you've become? The voice, his own but younger, was muted. He hoped one day to get rid of it forever. There was no place for thoughts like that. Not in this day and age. Something else Mr Mackenzie had told him.

Jamie remembered nothing from the sight of the Doctor sprawled on the gantry. He had sweaty nightmares about being dragged through broken streets, and Zoe. His arm was on fire. He knew he'd been shot. That made him afraid, the Doctor had always warned him about things called germs and infections that were small and lived in your arm if you let them. But they didn't stay small. As the heat from the wound overwhelmed him and the streets changed to a crowded filthy green room that stank of death and sickness and bodies, he could feel them growing. Growing and growing until they were as big as Macra.

The Safe Spot came to him then. Back home, before the Doctor. Before anything. The little glen, and the snow on the mountaintops and the loch where he'd collected firewood. Sometimes it stopped the things in his arm growing, and sometimes it didn't. He thought he heard pipe music and wondered if Death was calling to him from the hills.

Instead of Death, he had woken up to cool sheets and Mr Mackenzie sitting at his bedside.

The fiery arm felt cool now. Clear, like someone had scraped the muck out of it. The Doctor must have...

There was something he couldn't remember. 'Doctor?' he asked. He was in a different room now. On his own in the only bed. Cool grey walls and a barred window.

Mr Mackenzie patted his arm. 'Hush now, my boy,' he cooed, stroking Jamie's brow. 'We have doctors.' The canvas chair creaked as he moved.

Gradually, wakefulness returned to Jamie. He needed water and food and Mr Mackenzie was there to give it to him.

'You're a special one,' a lady nurse said to him one of the times he woke up. She was middle-aged and sad looking. Jamie liked her. She looked like a mother. 'Oh, they want you...' she said.

'Special...' he replied, using his voice again.

The nurse stuck one of those glass thermo-things in his mouth. His mind was in shards. He couldn't remember a thing.

She talked, soothing him. 'It was the uniform,' she said. 'You came from the Centre. He wants to know what they do there. It would be best to tell him.'

Jamie wanted to tell her he'd only borrowed... stolen... the uniform. He could remember flying and Zoe. Where was Zoe? He had to protect her.

You like what you've become?

'Come with me,' said Mr Mackenzie. 'We can save the world.'

As ever in the presence of his new mentor, Jamie felt his mind clear. He was with someone to whom he could anchor himself, sort out the noise.

Chief Protector Graham Mackenzie did not look like a Chief Protector, a General or a Laird. He looked like a thoughtful, slightly tubby uncle. But he was all those things to Jamie now.

'You look exhausted, lad.'

Even the accent was right. A soft, Scottish burr.

Mr Mackenzie sat behind his tidy desk. The room seemed disproportionately large, dwarfing both him and the desk. Muted electric bulbs dangled from cables. Mackenzie was between fifty and sixty years old. A respectable age.

The only objects left on the desk were two books. The first was a modest leather-bound holy Bible. During Morning

Prayer Mr Mackenzie usually read from this Bible. Some of the words had been changed but the stories were still the same ones that Jamie remembered from his own time. Stories of good and evil that he found comforting.

The second book was less physically impressive but in good condition and laminated with clear plastic. This book was called *Message is Clear* and the rumour was that Mr Mackenzie thought of it as his second bible.

‘I think you’re ready, laddie,’ said Mr Mackenzie from his chair. He smiled a warm smile.

Jamie returned that smile. He couldn’t contain himself. He knew what the words meant.

‘You are now officially a constable in the District of London Metropolitan Militia,’ Mackenzie continued. He shoved some papers round to face Jamie. ‘Contract of employment. Just sign on the line. I’ve arranged to have a more formal swearing-in this afternoon.’

Jamie hesitated for a second, not too hot on the old reading and writing - always suspicious of the skill. But he knew enough to print his name. He stood to attention, full of pride. ‘Thank you sir. I won’t let you down.’

Mr Mackenzie waved an idle hand. He wore a simple white shirt with an incongruous blue cardigan. His eyes were hazel and sincere - almost womanly. ‘That’s the bureaucracy out of the way. Sit down. Let’s talk. And eat.’

Food arrived. Hot breakfast. Good food.

There were still questions to be asked. Jamie forced himself. ‘Zoe?’ He heard the hopelessness in his voice. It would have been nice to have good news for once.

Mr Mackenzie shook his head. ‘You know the answer to that, Macrimmon. I’m sorry. But we try. We try. Believe me, you’ll be the first to know.’

Jamie felt the tiredness returning. The confusion. He cradled his twingeing arm.

With gentle patience, Mr Mackenzie waited for him to finish. A councilman came in and took the plates away.

Mr Mackenzie stood up. ‘I think you’re ready to learn just what it is we do here,’ he said. ‘The big picture.’

Jamie watched as he walked to a panelled wooden door tucked away in a corner. Mr Mackenzie produced a small chain of keys, selected one, and then unlocked the door. 'Please, follow me.'

At first they had not believed him. Jamie felt bad, because he knew they had saved his life and he wanted to do everything he could to repay them.

Mr Mackenzie and another man sitting in the bland seats. The other a frightening man in steel glasses, holding a hypo needle thing. The room with its single bed, which he now knew was part of the medical wing of the Kensington Town Hall Complex.

'What rank do you hold in SILOET?' asked Mr Mackenzie. Always gentle, always kind. 'What is the command structure? What is the purpose of the organisation?'

Steel-glasses man was silent, just staring.

'If you were deserting, we can help you,' Mr Mackenzie went on. 'All you have to do is tell us.'

Jamie tried to tell. About the TARDIS arriving inside that strange metal base in the sky. About what had happened. But he couldn't get the story straight, couldn't quite get a grip on the events, like trying to catch a fish with your bare hands...

'They killed him...' he recalled moaning.

'The Doctor?' asked Mr Mackenzie, for confirmation. Steel-glasses man looked weary at this, but Mr Mackenzie never seemed to lose patience.

'Aye,' said Jamie. 'They killed him.'

'And you want to get them back,' said Mr Mackenzie in his cool, even voice. 'You want to make them pay.'

'Pay,' Jamie rolled the word around on his tongue. 'Aye. They can pay.'

Mr Mackenzie seemed to consider. He looked up at the striplights. 'We can do that. We can make them pay. But you must help us first. Tell us. Please.'

Jamie writhed. He wanted to help, he really did. But he couldn't remember. He just couldn't remember. Just fragments.

The door led to some kind of emergency bolthole. Step after step straight down. A string of bulbs illuminated the way.

'Mind. We don't want you falling.' Mr Mackenzie moved lightly, familiar with the descent. Jamie followed, letting his words sink in. They seemed to fill up the gaps inside him, reinforcing him. 'Six months. Six months since I dragged you out of that reeking fleapit of a hospital. I still do the rounds, even now. We still get the young men coming to London. God knows why - how much worse can it be out there in the provinces?'

He paused for moment, to look at Jamie. 'We must work together to rebuild. It will be difficult, and often we will despair, but we will not give in to the darkness. To do so would be criminal. No?'

Jamie had listened to a lot of this kind of talk during his training, but it had been a long time since it had just been him and Mr Mackenzie. The stairs wound down. Under the Town Hall. It must be.

Mr Mackenzie halted. He looked back at Jamie, a sly grin on his face. 'A seventeenth-century Highlander in twenty-first-century London. Not many would have believed. It's ridiculous.'

'Aye,' Jamie stuttered. 'I reckon I must have been off my head.'

Mr Mackenzie placed a hand on Jamie's once wounded arm. 'I still believe you. You wouldn't lie. They did something to you in there. That place. The Centre. And one day we'll work out what it was. Together.'

The Centre. Yes, thought Jamie, feeling the anger, a lush, sensuous anger like warm water rush over him. The anger that sustained him. The Centre. One day he would go back there. Mr Mackenzie had promised.

They were off down the steps again. Mr Mackenzie sensed his rage. 'I think you'll see very soon now.'

The steps ended in yet another door, closed, bolted and locked. A silent and grey-faced guard stood at the door. He snapped to attention, eyes darting to Jamie.

‘Open up if you please, Caffrey,’ said Mr Mackenzie.

Stencilled words in yellow paint stated: ‘Entrance A. Lead-lined.’ And there was a strange triangular sign. In a flashing memory from a previous life, Jamie thought it might have something to do with radios... radiators... radiation!

The guard obeyed, unlocking and unbolting.

Jamie heard a strange noise from beyond the door. Rustling. Movement. The door opened on oiled hinges. ‘You want me to come in with you, Mr Mackenzie?’ asked the guard, and Jamie noticed reticence. He was afraid.

‘No, no, thank you, Caffrey,’ Mr Mackenzie replied. ‘Just the young man and myself. He needs to be shown the truth, don’t you Macrimmon?’

Jamie tried to squint into the gloom. The noise had ceased. Had it been a voice? ‘Whatever you say, Mr Mackenzie.’

The chief was a kind, determined, careworn man. A trustworthy man. He was like the Doctor. Jamie would follow him anywhere.

‘All right,’ said Mr Mackenzie calmly. ‘Let’s go in.’

The bunker was full of Shiners. They were tied together and stuffed into cages dangling from the vaulted ceiling. Mouths moved, and they took bites out of each other. As they sensed the two men walk in, they began to keen and moan. They were weak, staring and mad.

Jamie clapped a hand over his mouth. ‘Oh my God,’ he whispered.

Mr Mackenzie walked forward, unhurried. ‘Once a nuclear bunker, a place to cower from the world. Now, the means to survive a different kind of Armageddon.’

Jamie could only stare. Was Mackenzie insane? After all this, after everything he had done for him? Surely not. It couldn’t be true.

‘Sit down, Macrimmon,’ said Mr Mackenzie. He indicated a steel table set dead in the centre of the room. Two fold-down

aluminium chairs were tucked under it. All around, above, the Shiners were moving, biting, moaning.

‘Please.’

Jamie kept his eye on those swinging cages. It was cold in here, and those staring creatures unnerved him. He’d never seen so many. In fact, he’d only ever seen one before. One that had been caught somewhere in the country and brought to the Complex, its aged mouth working up and down as the troops had wheeled it in. To be caged up with the others. Jamie remembered its yellow, staring eyes - the stringy hairs dangling from its scalp and chin. The rotten, hungry teeth.

‘Macrimmon. Jamie.’ Mr Mackenzie’s insistent voice again.

He walked to the table and sat down.

Jamie followed, feeling the dread rise in him.

‘It’s an unpleasant place, I know,’ said Mr Mackenzie. ‘At first glance. But let me tell you. It’s also a place where we might start to rebuild. I often come here, surrounded by the poor wretches, wondering what secrets, what greatness may be locked inside them.’

‘I don’t... I don’t understand...’ Jamie tried to say.

‘I know. So let me tell you.’ Mr Mackenzie stared at him. Hard. ‘You’re very special to me, you know. When I found you I took you for just another wreck on the streets. Broken by the world. But when you spoke, raved in your terrible delirium, I believed you. I believed *in* you.’

Mr Mackenzie looked up at the high vaulted roof. It was as if he saw through it. A private thing, something that only he could see. His words floated up. ‘You need to go back in time. Back to before the war. I was just a constable myself then, in the UN police. A good career, helping and saving lives. Humanity had reached the pinnacle of grace, so we thought. Crime had almost disappeared, there was food for all and we had even sent our species out to live on other planets. Imagine that Macrimmon. The human race conquering the stars. We thought we were invincible.’

He looked back at Jamie and his eyes were warm and moist. ‘Oh, we were mighty in our arrogance. We believed we were, if not gods, then the next best thing.’

‘And then slowly things started to go wrong. No one knew what had happened. It was as if the world imploded on itself. Punctured and deflating. Suddenly, the fusion power that sustained us seemed crippled. There was crime again. Murder. Water was poisoned, terrible accidents costing thousands of lives that no one could explain. I myself was called to the tragedy that overwhelmed the Channel Link townships, fishing bodies from the cracked domes. How could these things be? What had gone wrong? Who would do this to us?’

‘At last, we knew. The cover-ups, the strange sightings in the skies, all explained in one great book. The book I have on my desk up there. There had been a war and no one told us.’

Jamie nodded, he’d heard this part before. ‘The Myloki,’ he said, wondering really what that meant.

‘The Myloki. A real alien invasion, like something from a hundred years ago. A war we won without even knowing it.’ Mr Mackenzie smiled. ‘I’ve told you all this. What I’m coming to, what really became apparent to me, I realised *after* the war.’

Abruptly, he stood and looked up at his creatures. ‘You see, after many long years of thinking and research, I understood. No great epiphany, no sudden jolt of enlightenment, no.’

Jamie didn’t flinch. He stared at Mr Mackenzie and remained silent. This was sounding like a sermon and nothing was going to halt the flow.

‘In short. We had grown too arrogant. We had abandoned God. And He visited a curse upon us. The Myloki. A word, a meaningless word for a power humanity could no longer comprehend. A word that came here thirty years ago to confront us with our sins. To save those who wished to be saved, to judge those who had turned away.’

Jamie felt torn. Half of what Mr Mackenzie was saying just seemed like lunatic nonsense. The kind of talk the Doctor would have seen through instantly.

But the other half, the half that appealed to the old Jamie Macrimmon, the little piper’s boy from the loch, was beguiling. Understanding. Real.

Mr Mackenzie nodded. 'And our enemies want it for themselves. Those that hide and cower in the Centre wish to keep it from us. SILOET.'

Mr Mackenzie looked at the swinging cages around him. 'These poor devils here have been touched by that power. We do not need to pity them. They have been given a great gift. Immortality, Jamie. The chance to live eternal life.'

Still clutching Jamie's hand, he yelled out joyously, 'We should envy you! You have been touched by the divine!'

The moaning started up again. It rang round the bunker. Jamie felt cold static horror grip his body. But not a repulsed horror of Mr Mackenzie. Far from it. The chilling realisation that he was in the presence of the Divine.

'He himself visited us, Macrimmon, and blessed us with immortality! The word? They call it Myloki. I have a much more ancient word.' Mr Mackenzie paused again, out of breath. 'The word is God!'

Extract from *Message is Clear* by Neville Verdana

Let me tell you about the Indestructible Man. I can tell you're dying to know.

I knew him when he was an only too-destructible man called Grant Matthews. Captain Grant Matthews.

An Englishman, thirty-four years of age and newly promoted from lieutenant. This would be 2068 AD, the year the war began.

Although his personnel file has long been destroyed, I'll tell you what I remember. Captain Matthews was born and schooled in Winchester, England. His father was a civil aviation pilot and his mother a journalist. He was an adventurous lad, not especially bright but not stupid either. His precocity and willingness to learn earned him a commission in the old UN Intelligence Task Force but nothing marked him out as anything special. He was a good team player and fiercely loyal. The good folks at the PRISM test centre rejected him twice before his final acceptance on the captain's training.

Actually, there is one thing I do recall from his file that marked him out and that was his appearance. Grant Matthews is reported as having an exceptional level of physical attractiveness. He looked like a movie star.

It's important to note this detail. You see, over the next three years he gained a reputation as some kind of super agent. I first heard this in the gossip amongst the CHERUB fighter pilots - those women who manned the rapid response jets we kept at readiness on SKYHOME. In my opinion this reputation, this *legend*, came about purely because of his looks. Because in all respects but one, Grant Matthews was a perfectly ordinary man.

The war was only six months in when it happened to him. It was only his second assignment.

It was my job to report the accident to Colonel LeBlanc. When the news came down the ether, my first reaction was of numb despair. At this point, it seemed every day the Myloki were taking us apart piece by piece. Matthews' crash was another statistic in a mounting roster of disaster.

He had been ordered to provide transport for the UN global ballistics coordinator, Piotr Ostrovsky. The mission was considered

priority orange, so Captain Matthews was perfectly entitled to drive the diplomat in a standard PPV vehicle - a nondescript PRISM auto devoid of identity markings. Standard procedure. Then.

The journey was short - from an anonymous airfield in Texas to the conference centre in Kennedy City. No enemy activity had yet been reported in that area and the city was as safe as Captain Matthews could make it without actually drawing public attention to his actions.

The ballistics conference was hardly important enough to warrant serious attention. So we thought.

The crash became official only when Captain Matthews failed to report in on his regular time check. I ordered the alert raised to red and dispatched a lieutenant to investigate.

I also scrambled Captain Adam Nelson - our most experienced officer - to the scene. A hunch perhaps that something was really wrong.

The car was found, as was the body of Ostrovsky. Captain Matthews was crawling through the desert, wounded and bleeding. He stated he had been attacked by a Myloki atmosphere craft and had been thrown from the PPV wreckage. Nelson checked out the dead body, Matthews was patched up and off they went to warn the conference.

Six hours after the crash, the lieutenant assigned to clear up the mess found a second body, half-buried some distance away from the auto-wreck. It was burnt to unrecognisable cinders.

The lieutenant insisted on sampling scorched tissue from those cinders with his newly issued DNA testing device. It is this man, whose name I forget, who is responsible for saving the Earth.

We had fatally misjudged the Myloki. It wasn't Ostrovsky they had been after. It was Captain Matthews himself. They wanted a high-ranking PRISM officer.

Matthews disappeared, just as the conference began. Patrolling in a PRISM jetpack, Nelson found him planting a bomb on the roof of the sixty-storey conference tower. He shot Captain Matthews off it. Matthews fell nearly three hundred metres into a busy freeway.

And lived.

This Captain Matthews was an imposter. A replica, created by the Myloki.

The real Matthews was burnt and left in a shallow grave somewhere in Texas.

However, the replica thought and felt and remembered like Matthews. He possessed the personality, the emotions and memories of the original. He believed he *was* the original, in every way. Except he wasn't. He isn't.

Matthews was our first breakthrough.

Up until then we had been facing two types of clandestine attack. Firstly, there were the 'Shiners'. These were the 'possessed' - ordinary men and woman who were somehow enslaved by the Myloki. Their wills wiped out so they became nothing but puppets, acting under orders from their new masters. They seemed tougher and more resilient than humans but in reality this was more to do with their inability to care about self-damage, and their masters' willingness to drive them beyond all normal human tolerances. Some instances of original personalities remained, enough to get past guards in bases and so on, but after a while we learnt to spot them.

The second type was the replica. All two of them. The first, Captain Taylor - the officer in charge of the attack on the Myloki base up on the moon - returned to us to wreak havoc. No one had ever got close enough to him and lived to make any kind of accurate report on what made him tick. However, the Myloki clearly had insufficient knowledge of human physiology at that time to create an effective replica. Taylor had the same lack of initiative as the more common Shiners. They had sent him back as a slack, emotionless zombie.

Matthews was different. This one was identical in every way, down to the DNA. Furthermore, he believed himself to be Matthews. This was revealed once Colonel LeBlanc had ordered the xeno-psychologists to unblock the Myloki conditioning. A fantastic reconstruction.

What was really amazing and frightening about the new Captain Matthews was not the breathtaking accuracy of his duplication but his imperviousness to damage. It seemed that he could be hurt, and wounded. He felt pain and privation like any human. He wasn't especially strong or resilient. It was just that he couldn't be killed. Not by anything.

VI

The only person in whom he confided anything was Gregor, the dour Estonian. Gregor seemed interested in his predicament and shared in his anger and misery.

He seemed amused by the Jamie's thirst for perilous duty. As they strapped on armour ready for their next patrol, Gregor began to talk.

'Ah, listen to me Macrimmon. I worry about this anger in you. You must treat this impulse like a dangerous animal. You must not poke it with stick, or you will regret...'

Jamie was not exactly regretting. But he was wondering. He hadn't seen Mr Mackenzie since that morning in the bunker. Instead, he had been placed on long, intensive shifts of police work. Dangerous but somehow routine. Patrolling the ruins of northwest London, keeping an eye on the foraging work gangs, bringing in the occasional sniper. The streets were dangerous and messy, the population living barely above subsistence; people ready to kill each other for a loaf of bread.

Jamie understood the Militia force was vital to keep a lid on the city, but he had expected something a bit more direct. Something against the Centre.

He was beginning to wonder how long he was willing to wait.

For a week now, he and Gregor had teamed together on night duty. They sat and smoked in the troopers' mess. Gregor liked his schnapps and seemed to find the world a big joke to which only he understood the punch line.

Now, suddenly, they had both been called out on a special patrol. Jamie hoped he was about to see his first real action.

'Ah, it is terrible,' said Gregor, lacing his boots. 'Everything collapses. Jamie my friend. Nothing lasts forever. This is how

it should be. For who would wish an eternity of this?’ He looked round at the locker room for theatrical effect.

There was a twisted-up mistake in that statement, Jamie was sure of it, but he was damned if he could find it. Zoe’s absence stabbed at him like a knife. He pulled his body armour straps tight.

‘What really happened in the war?’ Jamie asked. Anything to take his mind off her. ‘To cause all this?’

The smile faded from Gregor’s flushed face. ‘You know, I was only young man at the time. A child, growing up north of here. My parents relocating from the old land. It was a prosperous time; there were no countries, and folk could come and go as they pleased. Not like now. Not at all like now.’

He shook his head. ‘The war that was not a war. For nobody told us. All we knew was that within months, our old world was gone. Things they break down. The water went bad. No power for weeks on end. Restrictions on travel, restrictions on food, everything. Terrorists they tell us. A huge global threat. And then they tell us about New York and the atomics. Just a big hole in the ground and nobody knows why.’

Jamie tried to imagine. He couldn’t. His imagination was no longer capable of such acts. He had trained it well.

‘Oh, we are not stupid, friend Jamie,’ Gregor continued, as if Jamie had answered his question. ‘We know something is up. A new word appears: PRISM. A force that has come to save us from the terrorists. Nice uniforms and big, big rockets and planes and stuff. We in London find our money is worthless one day. 29 August 2068 AD. The day the banks collapse and then everyone fights. From then, we live like the Stone Age. Soon all this stuff...’ he slapped the gun propped against the bar table, ‘this stuff will be gone and we will be *in* the Stone Age. I do not think mankind will live long after this.’

‘Why say that?’ Jamie knew he sounded disappointed. He’d expected more from Gregor.

‘Maybe it is our time to go. We have been here a long time Jamie. We start to think the place is ours by right. But this is not so. This is not so.’

‘That was all you saw of the war? Nothing else?’ Jamie had been on the end of Gregor’s alcohol-fuelled end-of-the-world talk before. The locker room was emptying out. The police van would be waiting for them.

‘Oh I see things,’ Gregor tapped his nose. ‘Things, in the sky. UFOs they call them. Men in them but men are not controlling them. We all see them but officially they never exist. And then the great book came out. The last great book which finally puts the nail on the coffin. We find out we have been lied to. That the Earth was attacked by... something. And they come here and change people. Make Shiners. And the man who saves the planet is not a man at all. A man who puts the fear of God into everybody. And thank God that he is on our side. And thank God harder that it was not you.’

Whistles from outside. Time to go. Jamie was puzzled. ‘Why do you say that?’

Gregor clipped his tool belt over his armour. They began to jog out to the van. ‘I think a man who knows he cannot die is a man who does not for long remain sane. How can you live with yourself forever?’

After that night in the bunker, Jamie had felt his last tie to his old life slip and off he was, floating. What Mr Mackenzie had shown him was terrible, awful even, but it was a chance. The last explanation of a world gone horribly wrong. His world now.

He regretted considering Mr Mackenzie mad. There was no madness. There was no sanity. There was just the life you were given. The meaning you yourself imposed. Take the Shiner. These creatures were necessary. Thirty years ago the hand of God had stretched down for them and they had been chosen. Shiners were those who had understood. And now they awaited His return. Immortality would be theirs. And those who saved them.

Jamie was convinced now that his time with the Doctor had been wrong. This was something he had oft suspected. After all, as a boy hadn't his father and the clan Laird warned of the dark things that hid in the bushes? That if you looked into an icy pond too long the goblins who lived there would steal your soul. That a coward would burn in hell.

The Doctor had seemed to think that none of this was real. That magic was only a trick cleverer than you could understand.

Now Mr Mackenzie was not arguing with that. It was just that the Doctor hadn't understood all of it. The real answer was that science wasn't enough. There was something inside people that always felt there was more. After all, science couldn't explain what happened when you died, could it? Or even what happened before you were born.

For Jamie had always suspected that beyond this world, there was another world - the world of the unseen. Where dwelt angels with devils and creatures that needed sacrifice and succour and were always hungry.

Who was the Doctor to say these things weren't real?

That Yetis were robots, and Cybermen were nothing but men who had gone wrong was all well and good. But what about the things no one could explain?

Jamie had loved the Doctor and had he been alive he would have been by his side forever, but that didn't make him right.

To think that was to be weak. To believe that the universe was rational and benign and explainable, well it was a nice thought but it was naive. Mr Mackenzie had shown him this. With the Doctor, Jamie had been a boy. Now he was forced to be a man. There was no point wishing this was not the way, because there was no alternative.

So, as Jamie watched the west, he knew that there would be a return and that he would do everything in his power to help Mr Mackenzie be ready for when it happened.

He rubbed his arm. It still ached, still hadn't properly healed. The police van stank of sweat and cordite. He breathed in

deeply, recoiling at the pungent rubber reek from the helmet strap.

It was getting dark outside. He felt old and sad.

Jamie peeked through the iron grille in the rear door. The van moved slowly and noisily through the streets. It was like a beast, some snuffling pig that nosed its way along the rubble and barricades. The rotten spine of the M4 flyover arched over the darkening skyline. A few fires were lighting up windows in the houses and tower blocks. The decent people, Jamie hoped. The ones they were trying to protect.

A few shots crackled in the twilight.

He decided to practise. Unclipping his nightstick, Jamie tried a few swings. The cramp in his arm was there but he could loosen it up. Suddenly self-conscious, he noticed Toby grinning at him under his plastic facemask. Toby was a Nigerian and his face was already gleaming with perspiration.

'Thinking about cracking the heads, yeah?' Toby gave him a thumbs up.

There were twelve of them in the van. Shock troops, they liked to call themselves. Mr Mackenzie didn't like firearms, but Jamie guessed that at least four of them were carrying. The Top Squad, the Enforcers, the names went on. Jamie didn't know how many names but there were a lot.

The van shuddered to a halt. This was it.

Toby nodded, still grinning. The man was six feet four if he was an inch and Jamie doubted two of the troopers could bring him down if the time called for it. Jamie had seen Toby pick up a council tax defaulter with one hand and hurl him over a tower block railing like throwing a stone. That was the first time Jamie had begun to have doubts.

The sergeant, a heavy-set London hard case called Stewart, creaked the rear doors open. He banged the side of the van. 'Out ladies!' he bellowed in his cockney drawl. 'Playtime!'

Jamie dropped out and saw they were near the river, somewhere in Hammersmith. A bad place to be at night even with the curfew.

'We got ourselves a Shiner,' said Stewart. He inclined a thumb at a low, barricaded block of flats. 'Somewhere in

there.' A scratched and faded sign stated: 'West Home Flats - Retirement Community'.

Jamie found himself shocked by the use of the word Shiner. So this was why he had been put out here. These shock troops. They must have all seen the bunker. Mackenzie's collectors.

The squad deployed themselves casually around the iron doorway. One trooper unbuckled the grille covering the main entrance. Jamie kept an eye open for snipers but he wasn't too concerned. There wasn't enough ammunition sloshing around. Not for them anyway.

Toby hauled the door-buster from the van. Even he strained under the weight of that metal cylinder. Still, he kept smiling. That was good, Jamie supposed.

He dropped his nightstick from hand to hand, watching the others. They were good lads, good in a tight spot. So why so anxious now? It was that word, and the memory of those creatures swinging and mewling in their cages. Bad enough up there, but free...?

Stewart produced something from beneath his blue combat armour. A handgun. He licked his moustache.

Jamie felt something twist inside. Not this. Not tonight.

A thump on his back made him jump. Jamie turned to see Gregor give him the thumbs up. 'Be careful,' said his friend. 'This could get nasty.'

With a grunt, Toby swung back, then threw the heavy door-buster at the barricade. There was a remarkably loud metallic clang and the door bent with the weight. Immediately, covering troopers were kicking away at the door.

Stewart had his PA mike to his mouth and was yelling at the occupants to surrender. Jamie braced himself for gunfire. A pause, then in they charged.

The block lobby was poor and peeling, but Jamie wasn't surprised. Everything was poor and peeling, including the people.

As he darted across the threshold, Jamie saw that at least they had power. There was even a small table holding a vase full of flowers. Someone was making an effort.

The occupants were emerging from their flats. Mostly old and black, Jamie saw. Maybe even the original tenants. They saw the police squad and immediately put their hands in the air. Any defiance was quickly overcome with sensible resignation. Jamie felt relief. He had no interest in bashing up innocent people.

‘Search!’ bellowed Stewart, pushing him forward. ‘For Christ’s sake, Macrimmon.’

‘Aye...’ Jamie muttered into his helmet. He avoided the eyes of the old woman who was staring neutrally at him. She was wearing a green quilted nightgown. He strode into her flat.

Voices from the lobby. Troopers screeching, already angry.

‘They’ll be hoarding - this lot always do.’

‘Where’s the Shiner you filthy old bag?’

Jamie didn’t need to search. The old woman had nothing. A mattress on the floor, a thermos and a couple of candles. A pair of spectacles.

Jamie felt ashamed. His armour was constricting him. No more. He couldn’t do any more. What was wrong with him?

There was a book on the floor, black and leathery. Fighting his shame, he knelt and picked it up. An old Bible! Same as Mr Mackenzie’s. He’d interrupted her prayers.

‘Ah, no...’ he moaned, resigned. He dropped the book. As an afterthought he knelt again and tucked it beneath the mattress. In case anyone checked. He felt confused. How did this tie in with Mackenzie? What was the right thing here?

‘Get that cellar door open!’ he heard Stewart yell. Jamie took a deep breath and left. He couldn’t meet the old woman’s eyes on the way out.

Toby was kicking away at a door down a stairwell. Troopers fingered their nightsticks eagerly. The residents shrunk against the walls. Their eyes gave away that there was something down there all right.

Jamie’s jaw was hurting. He was gritting his teeth. Action. Give him action to take away the doubts. All of a sudden he

wanted to hit someone. Take out their teeth. Stewart spotted him and read his expression. 'That's more like it,' he hissed.

The cellar door burst open under Toby's kick. Immediately, two shots flared in the darkness. The troopers scattered.

Jamie saw Toby's chest armour burst open. The big man was hurled backwards. No blood. The kevlar had done the job.

Now they had done it, thought Jamie. This is a gang nest.

'Bastard pigs!' came a thickly accented voice. And then more shots. A grey-bearded resident, wearing a flat cap along with his dressing gown, clutched his ear and uttered a cry. He fell; brown face turning grey and blood pooling out from under him.

'Shoot them! Shoot them!' Stewart was yelling. He'd forgotten he had one of the only guns.

Jamie felt his arm throb. It was remembering what bullets could do.

A stumbling from the cellar stairwell and a group of men were charging out into the lobby. The troopers fell on them but there were so many bodies that the charge quickly became a confused mess. Jamie took a step forward but felt Stewart's hand hold him back. 'Wait!' He aimed the pistol.

Another shot, but not from Stewart who was tumbling backwards. The sergeant clutched his throat, coughing out blood. He fell to his knees, choking. The handgun dropped and skittered across the stone floor. Then Stewart pitched forward, writhing and trying to breathe.

Jamie was frozen in horror. The noise of the melee increased, with more bodies pushing their way out of the cellar. Fighting was intense and hand-to-hand.

The elderly residents were dashing back into their apartments.

A young man, baseball-capped and holding a sawn-off piece of wood, clawed his way out of the fighting mass. He stared at Jamie, his face a mixture of fear and aggression. He looked down at the struggling body of Stewart. Jamie wished he could believe the expression on the man's face was one of shock.

Angered, Jamie stooped and picked up the handgun. He pointed it at the gang member. 'Drop it!' he said, and hoped he wouldn't.

'Don't! Don't!' the young man cried instead, and hurled the piece of wood away. 'I don't want no fight.'

Jamie realised this wasn't a gang nest. Not in a serious way. The gunfire at the beginning had been panicked, random. These were just kids.

It didn't make any difference. Now Stewart had been shot, they were going to get it anyway. Oh God.

He thought of his Safe Spot again. The fresh mountains, the cold night air and the glow of the village fire. Whose fault was it he'd ended up in this hell? What had happened to Jamie Macrimmon?

He stepped forward. The youth put his hands out for the cuffs. 'You don't have to... I'll go with you.' His face was pale under the hat, almost in tears.

Jamie gun-butted him in the face. The youth buckled. A mess, he tried to ward off Jamie's blows. Jamie slammed the gun down again and again, tears in his own eyes. He found himself yelling incoherent threats, needing to blame someone, break someone before he himself shattered.

An arm on his shoulder. Jamie ignored it, kicking at the prone body. Something in the youth snapped.

The arm pulled him, earnest. After a thousand years he swung round, tears flowing freely now. It was the old woman whose room he had searched.

'Please...' she was saying. 'Please stop.'

He made his way through the ruined lobby, which was sticky with blood and crammed full of the despairing tenants. Bodies, including that of Stewart, lay at grotesque angles on the carpet.

Don't cave in yet laddie, he thought to himself. There could be worse to come.

There was.

He led two other troops, Gregor and a young lad like himself called Vintner, down the stone steps into the gloom.

'What a stink!' growled Gregor. Jamie nodded, oblivious to the stench of rotten meat. A single hung bulb illuminated the scene, sending bloated shadows over everything. A bare floor with a few shattered remnants of furniture. Gouged and crumbling walls. An old television sat on a rickety chair. The heat was stifling. There was no way the gang lived here; they must have retreated when they saw the pig van arriving.

Jamie reached the floor, cautious now.

'You think they -?'

'Aye,' Jamie answered quickly, killing any questions dead.

They heard the chains clinking. A low moan, almost a growl, somewhere in the shadows. Jamie turned to face the Shiner.

It was a man. Old like all of them. They'd slapped a neck chain round it and driven an ingot into the wall to tether it down. Bones were cracking and Jamie saw on the floor something that looked like old clothes.

'Oh God...' said Vintner, turning away. Even younger than Jamie. 'They gave it cats. Cats...'

The Shiner was picking its way through one of the carcasses, oblivious to the troopers' arrival. Its skin was stretched and white; nails yellow and elongated. It was cracking bones with its teeth. A straggly moustache drooped almost comically over its busy eating mouth.

'What they doing with it?' asked Vintner.

'Could be games. Sometimes they play games with them,' Gregor replied.

Games, thought Jamie. Suddenly he didn't feel so bad about breaking that gang youth's face.

'The old people upstairs,' said Vintner. 'You think... you think they knew?'

'They knew,' said Jamie.

The Shiner finally looked up at the three troopers facing it. Fur and bone dropped from its carrion teeth. The eyes were sunken and yellow. It hissed, thick drool falling from its ruined mouth. Jamie could smell its filthy breath from here. With a jerk, it launched itself at the troopers. Vintner jumped back, uttering an oath. The chain yanked it back.

Almost without knowing, Jamie slipped the handgun from his belt. Gregor placed a hand on his arm. 'Mackenzie... he want them... he want all of them.'

Jamie cocked the gun. He aimed it at those tiny eyes. The Shiner howled, trying to understand the chain.

'Macrimmon,' Gregor insisted, but only gently.

'Let him want,' said Jamie and pulled the trigger.

Somehow, he made it outside, into the warm night. One of the few remaining streetlights flickered sodium orange over the wasteland of the city. Unseen residents hurled abuse at him and the rest of the police.

Jamie hauled his helmet off, holding off the urge to vomit. His gloves were slippery with blood so he threw them away. The handgun nestled safe in his belt.

Blue lights: meat wagons and back-up flashed their way up the street. One trooper staggered from the ruined doorway. 'All over. Oh Christ.' He sat down in the street, eyes popping in shock.

All over. Kids with a few popguns against armoured police. No contest.

'What about the cellar?' asked one of the newly arriving troopers.

'All done,' Jamie replied, surprised that his voice was still the same. It betrayed his youth. He sounded innocent.

The trooper shook his head. 'What a night.'

Gang members were starting to emerge from the gloom of the residential home. They were cuffed and shoved by jubilant shock troops. Toby hoisted two of them outside, cradling their limp bodies in his massive arms.

Jamie nodded, disgusted at being part of this.

Gregor was by his side, helmet off. Sweat poured from his fleshy face. 'How you doing, Jamie? You okay?'

Jamie nodded, wondering whether he was. What in God's name had possessed him to shoot the very thing they had come to collect? What was wrong with him?

'This is bad,' said Vintner. 'This is very bad.'

Gregor turned on the kid and snarled. 'You din't see nothing, okay?'

'Okay! Okay!'

Gregor looked Jamie in the eye. 'None of us saw nothing. We don't know what happened.'

Jamie shrugged. Did Gregor really believe he cared whether Mackenzie found out it was him or not? That was the least of the matter. Why had he done it? It went against everything he now claimed he believed in.

Big arc lights kicked in. Vehicles arriving. Big ones.

'Looks like they gonna arrest *everybody*,' Gregor said. He grabbed Jamie's arm and discreetly tugged him out of the road. Vintner had his hands on his hips, breathing heavily. Jamie felt sorry for him. Thrown into this mess too young.

Aye, like he was an old sweat.

'What you gonna do?' Gregor hissed. 'What you wanna say?'

The huge lights flashed again. Jamie shielded his eyes. What were those trucks?

Mighty engines roared, making Jamie jump.

Vintner straightened up, confused. 'They aren't ours...'

Jamie took a step forward, only to feel Gregor once more pulling him back. The night was bathed in the stark glare of the trucks' headlights.

'Jamie! Stay down!'

The vehicles were fired up and moving towards the patrol vans. Troopers were unsure how to react, standing still, when Vintner suddenly began to shout. 'They aren't ours! They aren't ours!'

Panic. Troops and civilians scattered as the great headlights cut out. The massive vehicles were moving. Closer.

Militia drivers fumbled with ignition keys, crunching their vans into each other in a bid to get out of the way of these growling behemoths. Everybody was yelling. Jamie knelt with Gregor in the shadow of a doorway.

'Vintner!' Jamie yelled.

The boy policeman turned, excitement flushing his face red. 'Those are MOVERs. Hell.'

‘MOVERS?’

Vintner rolled to face him, childish excitement on his face. ‘Flamethrowers, anti-aircraft missiles, armour it’d take a nuke to penetrate. Developed from the old PRISM APVs.’

‘How come you know so much?’ Gregor’s voice, from Jamie’s right.

‘I used to have the toy,’ Vintner grinned. He ran forward, lost in his enthusiasm. Jamie bellowed, ‘Vintner!’ but the boy had gone.

The first MOVER piled confidently into the vans closest to it. The noise of its engine was terrifying. The vehicle looked like a living creature, its armoured windows like dead, dead eyes. It ground the vans into the road; shoved them into walls and houses. Glass burst everywhere.

Jamie held back, restrained by Gregor’s good sense. Lights were playing all over the place, making it impossible to see anything properly.

The second MOVER, dented and soot-blackened, hung back, as if covering its colleague. Both engines cut out. Only the throb of their internal generators made any sound. The narrowness of the high street accentuated their size, making them look like giant beasts. Their blank stare was unnerving.

‘What the hell do they want?’ asked Jamie.

The Militia began to open up on the MOVERs. ‘Very, very foolish...’ whispered Gregor, almost to himself.

There was a crump from somewhere, very loud, and something like a metallic rugby ball landed spinning in the road. Bullets pinged off the hulls of the vehicles, sparking in the darkness. A grey cloud burst out from the metal ball. Jamie knew what that was all about. Hadn’t the Doctor rigged the very same type of device?

‘Gas,’ he warned. ‘Gas.’

Just before the clouds obscured the vehicle, a beam of light crossed the nearest MOVER. Jamie caught a glimpse of something. Something he recognised. A symbol, a badge stamped on its front. A human figure superimposed on a globe. Some block letters. Where had he seen that before? Around the vehicle, troops were dropping like flies. Someone,

maybe even Vintner, was climbing on to the roof of the nearest MOVER. Jamie saw a flash of electricity, and the body fell away.

Gregor was fiddling with something in his belt. Jamie shrugged his hand off.

Them.

SILOET.

And a cold fury swamped out any other feeling. His hand went to the gun in his own belt.

'We should kill them all,' he said. 'All of them.'

Jamie looked away from the impassive hulks. He looked to Gregor who was coming at him with something that glinted. Jamie held up a defensive arm and caught the down swinging blow. He held, swung and pushed, but the Estonian was strong, very strong. Somewhere in the background, the entire force seemed to have opened up with their weapons. The MOVERs blasted plastic bullets back with a roar. Men screamed.

Gregor was as impassive as a Cyberman. Jamie felt his arm forced back. Sweat poured down his wrists. The object in Gregor's fist loomed larger.

'Don't...' Jamie managed to whisper. 'Please... don't...' His arms gave ground, centimetre by centimetre. He was bent back, straining to avoid the needle forced towards him.

Staring at Gregor's tireless face, Jamie felt the point prick, then puncture his neck just above the armoured straps. Warmth flooded his body. Gregor was killing him. He felt blood in his throat. In the distance a machine gun chattered away.

The darkness flared up. He was going to die. He was dead.

Extract from *Message is Clear* by Neville Verdana

Who are the Myloki?

Well, I can tell you who they aren't. They aren't Cybermen, or Axons, or lizards, or any of those good old-fashioned monsters out of history books.

Never at any point did we discover their physical form, or even if they had one. We don't know where they came from or what their intentions were. All we had were these strange radio messages that seemed to emanate from nowhere, that myself and my team spent all our time trying to decipher.

That they were intelligent and organised and hostile was about all we could understand.

Here's my opinion, for what it's worth.

I listened to those cold gloating sounds more times than I care to remember. And what I thought of was that moment when I lay under the stars in Barbados all those years before. When I was staring up at the sky and the universal knowledge of mortality came to me. The Myloki sounds seem even in my memory to encapsulate a great emptiness, a confusion, a knowledge that will always be out of the reach of human beings. Everything that humanity will never comprehend is contained in those sounds. And that is what I believe the Myloki to be - everything that is beyond us.

VII

The sun was starting to burn through the early morning mist. A line of light grew like a rip across the London landscape. Shafts poured through the thinning cloud. It felt like taking a deep breath.

When you saw a view like that, and the cars and buses moving through the streets, you really could believe that life was honestly and truthfully getting better.

From the twenty-third floor of the Euston Tower, London looked possible. You couldn't even see the wall that kept the rest of the world out. Only the GPO Tower (she thought that was what they called it) reminded her of the decay: its broken back making the structure look like a broken pencil.

She heard the whine of the lifts as they brought up her staff for the day. They didn't know what to make of her, she knew that, but this was a phenomenon she was familiar with. They found her cold and detached and that too was familiar. Only now there was an extra layer of it. One she had wilfully imposed on her sense of self. This was her life now, and she had to make the best of it.

Zoe Heriot looked down for a last glimpse of the fine line that was Tottenham Court Road. The old Warren Street tube station, perched on the corner and plaster boarded over, was the only clue that all things were not yet right. She had read the memos claiming that a rudimentary underground system would be back up and running within a year, but she didn't believe it. It would be at least five, according to her financial breakdowns.

The sun finally made an appearance and Zoe turned away. She knew this would be the last time she'd look out of the window and realise she was doing so until dark. The work hooked her that way, always had.

The early birds were walking into the open-plan office and Zoe felt uncomfortable, her throat tightening. No matter how familiar they became, there was always something about professional colleagues that she couldn't get a fix on. Perhaps it was the internal politics, the emotional and personal reactions to neutral information, the lack of logic. She didn't know.

'Morning Miss Heriot!' sang Carl as he whipped off his fancy bowler. 'No rain today!' He pulled at his raincoat, snagging it on the green star clipped to his oversized pinstripe jacket. Carl was small for his twenty-two years, and was like a child waiting to grow into his clothes.

Tongue-tied, Zoe just nodded and made a break for her office. 'Fancy a cup of tea?' came Carl's high voice after her.

Her in-tray was high with this morning's projections. Supply Opportunities kept running through the night, with clerics glued to telexes receiving information from around the world.

At ten she could turn on her PC and get to work. Speed was of the essence while the power lasted, so any pre-calculations she could manage were vital. She had to admit it: she loved her work.

Zoe watched Carl walk past her internal windows as if on a tightrope. Delicately, carefully (for Carl was one of the clumsiest people she had ever met) Carl eased himself in to her office, carrying a juddering mug in his hand. 'No milk I'm afraid,' he said. 'Delivery's late.'

I love my work... except for the interruptions, thought Zoe.

She realised Carl was hovering, waiting for something. She looked up, puzzled. He grinned. 'Anything I can... do?' he tried.

'No, no thank you Carl.' She saw the envelope on her desk. Carl turned to go. 'Except...' she said brightly.

Carl whipped back round, his face red. 'Mm?'

Zoe picked up the envelope. She pulled out the card with the crude printed red heart. 'This...' she began, sensing his discomfort. 'There's no signature. What does it mean?'

If he could, Carl would have hopped from foot to foot. He looked like he needed the lavatory. 'It... It's Valentine's Day.'

'What's that?'

'I don't... it's... a token, thing.' As if that explained anything.

'Do you know who left it on my desk?'

Carl stared at her. Then he acted being thoughtful. 'Mmm, no idea. Really. Have you?'

'I wouldn't have asked if I did, would I?'

'No, no. Of course not. Sorry.' He slumped and walked dejected from the office.

Zoe closed the door and bent down so no one could see her through the windows. She put her hand to her mouth and stifled a giggle.

The buzzer sounded. Work time. The room outside her office was full of people now, chatting about how awful it had been getting to work this morning.

Zoe sat down at her desk. Idly, she sipped her black tea. Eurgh. Still couldn't get used to it.

She smoothed down her getting-more-familiar short office skirt and adjusted her newly bobbed hair. Yes, it would be a good day today.

In fact, if it wasn't for the silver star on her jacket that marked her as a slave, everything would be perfect.

It had taken her time to adjust but she had done it. She had to. It was either that or break.

Zoe tried not to think about events prior to the last six months, but the memories came back anyway, unbidden and unwelcome.

How they had overpowered the security system on the sky base then been felled by a gas attack. The Doctor waking up on the jet and fixing the crew. Almost comic.

Until the climb up the gantry, the details of which she refused to allow in. Then it was all West London.

How she had dragged Jamie into that terrible place they called a hospital and laid him on a filthy bedroll. A man with feverish eyes and a swarm of flies on his sticky chest

clutched for her. 'Nurse!' he moaned through the sickening buzz. 'Please... a clean shirt?' The air was sweet with decay.

She had gone looking for drugs, or bandages, or help for his arm or anything human at all. She had found nothing. And when she returned, Jamie was gone.

It was then she felt she was losing her mind. Nothing seemed real. There was nowhere to go.

There were screams in the hospital too. Wounds, infections and other things. Sounds from rooms she recognised as a different kind of moaning. Not here surely, she remembered thinking.

A young man with fair hair touched her arm. Politely, he asked her to accompany him. 'I'm looking for my friend,' she wailed, clutching his arm.

'This way,' he said softly. She realised he was wearing a crisp white coat. He had a layer of sweat on his upper lip. His eyes were tired but kind.

Zoe allowed him to lead her through the ward, presuming he knew where Jamie had gone. They stepped over bodies, the doctor gently easing away grasping hands and shushing desperate pleas for help.

He led her through a set of double doors and into a decrepit old stone fire escape. Zoe followed him down, milky-stained daylight barely illuminating their way. 'Don't worry,' said the doctor, 'your friend is here.'

Two men in smart suits were waiting in a dingy cellar. An old ambulance rusted away behind a more solid modern van. The engine on the second was running.

Zoe turned to face the fair-haired doctor. 'What's happening?' she asked. 'Where's Jamie?'

'Don't worry about a thing,' he said and gently clasped her by the shoulders. Then he licked her face. She recoiled, frightened.

The doctor smiled and she smelled something sweet and sickly. A hand clamped a handkerchief on to her mouth. She tried to scream but couldn't, instead inhaling some vile vapour. Her vision blurred and the strength left her body. His smile filled her remaining view. He licked his lips.

‘Mmm...’ he moaned, thoughtful and savouring.
Zoe didn’t remember anything else.

The lift pinged open. Wall mirrors reflected her new self back at her. She saw a smartly dressed woman watching her.

She stepped inside and pressed the button for the thirtieth. Still a little clackity, she thought as the box hauled her upwards.

As ever, the smell of fresh coffee made her smile. There was nothing like it. Zoe walked past the Exec’s smiling receptionist. A telephone rang.

Mark was waiting in his office. It was the smell of his coffee that was wafting across the floor. He liked it strong and drank it constantly. Zoe planned to speak to him about caffeine.

‘Just had one made,’ he said, fussing over the cafetiere like he’d got a new toy. She declined with a shake of her head.

Mark Khan. Her executive and as tall, dark and handsome as they came. He said he was thirty-one, but Zoe put that as twenty-six at the most. He wore a smart grey suit and a creaseless, powder-blue cotton shirt. A darker blue tie hung immaculately from his collar.

‘I’ve finished the reports,’ she said, trying not to sound like a little girl. Mark nodded absently and she placed the file on his desk.

Mark carefully transferred his brimming mug from table to desk and sat down. ‘Anything interesting?’

Zoe thought for a second. Was this small talk? ‘All good. HR reports a steady projected increase in labour productivity by six per cent. I can’t be precise, of course, some of the data is...’

‘Sit down. Please.’

For some reason, she felt uncomfortably warm. The tower’s air conditioning was notoriously unreliable, it would be that. ‘The new orientation schemes appear to be working,’ she said, covering niggling emotions with facts. An old trick. ‘Recidivism is down by eight per cent.’

‘Good. Good.’ He was looking at his mug, apparently thinking about something else entirely. He looked up. ‘Would you please... sit down?’

Zoe did so, avoiding his gaze, just looking at the stuffed file.

Mark took a deep breath. ‘There’s a new place, restaurant, opened up in Piccadilly. The chefs just come over from Italy, I hear. I booked a table for two tonight.’

She resisted the urge to nod, her head numb.

‘I could make it an order,’ he said slyly.

Zoe giggled. ‘Someone left me a Valentine’s card,’ she said. ‘I didn’t know what it was.’

‘Of course not,’ came the wicked reply. ‘You’re from space.’

Wine made her giddy. She knew that, and in the past had been suspicious of the way it broke down inhibitions. Control was important. On the Wheel it had been a matter of honour. She had the reputation to sustain of being a cold thinking machine. Sometimes she thought that made some of the other station personnel try even harder to get her drunk.

It was just that Mark had a way of insisting without pressure. And the way he’d commented upon her old-fashioned evening dress. Not rude but as if she’d surprised him, like he’d never seen her before. ‘You look...’ he’d stuttered, ‘incredible.’

He was examining the bottle. Zoe found herself looking at him. He was so interested in everything. As he said himself, they made a good team. He enjoyed the aesthetics, the form of objects as a whole, and she was the perfect foil with her obsession with the mechanics. Their analysis of the workers’ productivity report had been noticed.

The restaurant rattled and hummed with the noise of civilisation. Open less than a week and the place was already full. She scanned the menu like it was a computer read-out and then couldn’t make up her mind. Mark chose a spicy linguine for them both. Once again, he was right.

There was a glance or two at the silver star on her dress, but Mark had been as smooth and as charming as ever to get them eased to their table.

The wine appeared almost immediately. 'Gratis,' the waitress said, smiling. She looked Italian, which Zoe liked. Another sign that this city was working.

Now they sat, she nursing a glass of water and he with his inevitable coffee.

'So,' said Mark.

'So,' she said back.

'Do you like your life, Zoe?' he asked, almost shy.

Panic. She could feel the wine working on her. 'If it's like this -' she indicated the snug restaurant, 'I might say yes.'

Mark took a sip. He savoured the flavour. 'It's the future. You know it.' The alcohol had darkened his shining brown face. 'We're building something here. The only way. Take this coffee. African. We have ships bringing coffee back from Africa. Imagine that. Ten, even five years ago, it wouldn't have been possible, what with the pirates and the maize infestation out there. Now we've got so many supplies arriving at the Thames that we've had to re-open Tilbury docks. They're talking about repairing the coastal railway so we can get the stuff here without the need for the armed motor convoys. The city is expanding.'

'Yes,' said Zoe. 'A healthy growth rate. It's a system that works'

Mark was expansive. She liked it when he was like this. 'And you wouldn't have believed it - when the old government was... ah, what a mess. Like a sick old man. Do you still think about... him?'

The old question. And she still didn't know the answer. 'I suppose... I suppose, I just can't believe he's gone. Even now. I didn't know him long but I had, I don't know, I always thought there was so much we would do. There seemed so much promise.'

She had created an awkward pause. How had that happened? She'd only answered his question.

The waitress came for their plates. Zoe couldn't help but avert her eyes from the green star pinned to her uniform. She was training herself.

'How's your accommodation? Better?' asked Mark.

‘Yes thanks. The girls are nice. And four to a dormitory is easier than that communal place.’

‘It’s odd,’ he said. ‘I can’t imagine you in a controlled home. All curfews and itemised power. Cooking rosters and matrons.’

Zoe shrugged. ‘Who’d be a slave? You know, I want to thank you for tonight. It’s been marvellous.’

Mark coughed. Zoe could swear he was nervous.

‘Are you all right, Mark? You seem...’

He waved a hand. ‘Yeah, yeah. Look, you know that Valentine’s Day stuff?’ He was serious. More serious than she had ever seen him.

‘I’m sorry if I’ve caused you discomfort, talking about the Doctor...’

‘Zoe, I think I’m in love with you. Will you marry me?’

Of course, it was all built on slavery. And that had to be wrong, didn’t it?

Well. Once she would have agreed, but now?

Zoe had seen the outside world, the world beyond the walls of the City, and anything had to be better than that.

And there were ways of handling the situation. No one liked it but what else could you do?

She had seen the financial reports. Only a glimpse, but there was an open policy here. Anyone could look at the conditions under which they lived, and the things they were trying to do. In fact, updates were hard to avoid as the figures were constantly being disseminated to the population. In the case of slaves, reading them was compulsory.

Since the buy-out of London by what remained of the major banks, the City had become safe, healthy and maintained a steady economic growth. The slaves were looked after, fed and given work. They were not free and luxuries were denied them - but they had a roof over their heads and could sleep in their beds at night. They could also, as she well knew, get promoted.

She found the figures fascinating. Locked into the mathematics of supply and demand, Zoe decoded the rebuilding of a civilisation.

Since the war, the facts of which were still a little vague to her, the rapid economic collapse it engendered had started to be reversed. Still small, still an infant, but growing.

A funny thing, the war. Almost no details existed to explain it to her. She knew the bare bones but she was surprised to hear from Mark himself that history was about to be cleaned up.

‘Of course I wasn’t born then,’ he said when she asked in his office one afternoon. ‘But it’s almost inevitable that its severity has been exaggerated. There’s no need to look for mystical alien conspiracy theories. In fact, current thinking for the City is whether there was or wasn’t a war isn’t important, so it may well be that we will just forget the whole thing. What difference does it make?’ And that was that, leaving Zoe thoroughly confused.

Of course London wasn’t alone. Other cities had been salvaged: Seattle, Rome, Sydney, Tokyo. Small nation states that operated on the only feasible course, using the one resource still in plentiful supply: human beings.

The third world had been least affected by the changes. Despite disastrous UN humanitarian aid decisions (something to do with a failed global teleportation system as far as she could make out), gigantic areas of arable land were largely unaffected by the collapse of the technological society. Parts of Asia, huge farmlands in Russia and the Ukraine, all there waiting for reclamation. Once sufficient capital had been generated to enable cultivation and transportation of its produce, the road to recovery was once again possible.

Everything depended on the slaves. A committed labour force, able to work for long hours under difficult conditions without access to rewards for their input. A ruling managerial elite, in this case the shareholders of the landowning companies, wielded absolute power and kept the slaves in check. So, supply ships were refitted, transport lines rebuilt and production re-started.

The more Zoe thought about it, the more logical the system appeared. The City had dealt with the real threat of resistance and rebellion in with a unique methodology. The truth.

There was no real need for draconian force, as the slaves were in the main recruited from the lawless wilds outside the City walls. Faced with starvation, disease and tinpot politics, no wonder they chose to live. And as she herself knew, it wasn't like it was barbed wire and whips. No, slavery was to many just like going back to work. A clever, clever system. As long as no boats were rocked, there was no reason why the City couldn't thrive and spread.

Personal liberty. Once so important to her, and vital to what made the Doctor what he was, now seemed a foolish luxury. She didn't have a time machine any more. She was stuck with what she did have.

The first thing they did when she was released from the procurement van was make her sit an exam.

She had shared the journey with two other frightened women. Alice and Althea were their names, and they had been kidnapped in the hospital too. Alice had been looking for her husband ('his lungs'), and Althea her son ('bullet wound'). The pleasant-faced doctor had found them first. Zoe thought she had never seen such malnourished and defeated women in her life. The world had etched harsh lines on to their features.

Both seemed afraid of her. Zoe realised it was the uniform she wore. As to why, she couldn't ascertain as neither woman even looked at her. They answered her questions about why they'd been in the hospital - despite its well-known dangers of kidnap and disease - but apart from that they had kept quiet.

They spoke to each other, once. Alice had leant to Althea and whispered that she had better pray - for the City gangs never returned any hostages.

After an eternity of driving, the women were led blindfolded out of the van and down into some sort of tunnel. A secret

gap in the concrete wall that she now knew kept the barbarians out.

Later on, she had wondered why such a wall existed. If conditions outside were so bad, why didn't the City just go out and recruit? Surely there would have been enough volunteers?

The truth was that the City was fragile. She understood that the lengthy induction programme for fresh slaves was vital. New arrivals needed intensive orientation otherwise rebellious instincts would never be overcome. Considering the harsh environment from which they were removed, Zoe realised that there was little alternative. Slaves were a precious resource; time-consuming to procure and prepare, but easily ruined. Sabotage and vandalism would have been a disaster.

Hence, the Program. Another City innovation. Escape attempts were rare, and fatalities were the exception in such instances.

When the blindfolds had come off, Zoe found herself in a simple room she now knew to be an old department store somewhere in Oxford Street. She, Alice and Althea were grouped with another five women, all taken from various parts of the country, all blinking with disbelief. Zoe wondered where the women were now. Probably factory operatives or food distributors, until they worked out how the meritocracy worked and got themselves up the ladder.

White-coated nurse types fussed over them, explaining that they were to be fed, then take a little test. They were not to worry, and all questions would be answered.

Not surprisingly, everyone expected to be executed at any moment. When that didn't happen, and food did indeed arrive, Zoe started to relax. Just a little. She was even tempted to ask about Jamie.

Of course, since then she had spoken to Doctor Ilsley, the psychologist who devised this initial induction into the city. The neutral room was a deliberate trick, designed to present a homely, unthreatening environment. That way their new surroundings were in clear contrast to the squalor of where

they had come from. Their first knowledge of the City as a better world, but not one that was totally out of reach to them.

Next came the tests. Zoe panicked at first, performing horribly badly on the initial manual side - peeling potatoes, changing a fuse, assembling the components to fit into a transistor radio - mainly because the processes seemed so archaic. Alice and Althea were pleased with themselves. Probably because they had done better than her. However, the next test was more suitable - a written paper. Basic mathematics really. Zoe had completed the half-hour paper in two minutes. By now, even the most lingering doubts had subsided.

A doctor, a real one this time, took the three women through a medical. Althea was suffering from tuberculosis and taken away.

After that came Stage One Orientation. A friendly Dr Ilsley led the women into a conference room. There was tea and biscuits.

Doctor Ilsley explained that they weren't all about to be shot. In fact, the opposite. The assembled company was needed, vital to the running of the City. They were to be champions of a new world.

Zoe had been through this kind of thing before in her own time, but it wasn't that which had caused her to faint. It was the peace, the warmth and the break that set her off. For the first time she had been able to reflect upon the death of the Doctor and the loss of Jamie. The facts hit her like a hammer. She was alone, adrift in Time and Space, and judging by the harshness of the society in which she now found herself, this was to be permanent. Horror and grief overwhelmed her. The Doctor was dead. He was dead. And she had also left Jamie to die in filth and squalor.

She started to scream. The lady stopped talking. She called for help.

Zoe remembered somebody pushing something into her arm, something that stung, that was warm and mercifully

blocked out the sheer grinding wave of terror that was bursting inside and threatened to burn her alive.

When she awoke she was in a clean, comfortable bed. A hospital, a real one this time.

A man who called himself a psychiatrist had spoken to her. To Zoe, the techniques he used were old-fashioned, misguided, but they did something to help bury her grief. Her world, everything she knew, had been wiped away. She was stuck here in this dreadful place. She felt she was dead already.

He helped with the guilt. He looked at her as she lay listlessly in her bed and said, 'I can help you live again. Be reborn. To join a process that you could give yourself up to entirely.'

There were questions, harsh ones. They wanted to know about the uniform she had been wearing. They knew it was a silhouette, whatever that had meant.

The psychiatrist had explained. 'They are an organisation, Zoe. A clandestine one. We have been trying to penetrate them for years. We believe they have spies here in the City. We want to find out what their remit is. What their aims are. They have technology, a hangover from their time as PRISM. How are they funded? How do they power themselves? We don't know. But we are worried about them.'

The psychiatrist seemed to believe Zoe when she told him she would provide every possible aid to strike back at those who had killed the Doctor. She became angry, very angry indeed. She told him about the base in the sky and the jet that brought them to London. She was sorry she couldn't help them more.

The psychiatrist nodded. He thanked Zoe, pinned the green star to her clothes and welcomed her to the City.

* * *

After that, Zoe was put to work. Her test results had been impressive. She was placed in a large dormitory full of women and packed off to work every day at a factory that made shoes. She worked in allocations, determining how much footwear would be held for use directly in the City and how

much for export, in return for crops and other non-indigenous goods.

She was good at the work, although she was there fourteen hours a day and it bored her stupid. Already she was starting to realise that the way to progress was to prove her worth. She started to innovate, simplify processes using her experiences of statistical analysis gained on the Space Wheel. She began to get noticed. One night she was beaten up in the women's washroom. Her attackers were masked but she recognised her supervisor easily enough.

For a while, she lost heart. It seemed she was just causing trouble for herself. Perhaps she should just keep her head down.

Finally, her big break arrived. A long-threatened computer collapse stopped production. There was real fear in the factory. Despite the open policy, sanctions were very real and harsh. Zoe only had to look at the battered slaves on display in the shop windows to realise how precarious her position was here. Everyone else was thinking the same thing.

She decided to take matters in hand. She suggested they start production again. If the supervisors gave her a few hours, Zoe promised to track and process the orders manually. She could do the calculations in her head.

Absolutely stuck, the supervisors could do nothing but agree.

The result was that Zoe was finally noticed. Her figures were faultless.

Exhausted, she was carried home by the supervisor who had assaulted her. Zoe slept, dreaming of numbers.

The next day, two men arrived to take her to Euston Tower. She was being transferred to the Office of Supply. And two months after that she was promoted to Deputy Head of Statistics. The green star became a silver star, she was moved to a new dormitory in Baker Street and finally she met Mark Khan, the man who was to become her husband.

She knew she was going to agree when she looked at him as they travelled in a company car to the wall.

Mark looked tired. He was working too hard.

Zoe knew that keeping him waiting was agonising for him. That she was being unfair. It wasn't just that she didn't want to commit. It was the other thing as well. By marrying him, she would be accepting that her old life was finally over. It would be gone and the City would be everything. She loved him; she knew that. Had known it as soon as he had declared himself. But was she ready to embrace her new world? The slave culture was logical, inevitable even, but deep down, despite everything, could she adopt these values as her own?

The answer was yes, she had to. She had to adapt. To live. And being loved was better than anything she could have had any right to expect.

All right, no slave had ever married an Exec. They both knew that. There would be problems. Zoe could be promoted but she couldn't escape her caste. However, together these challenges would be overcome. And you never knew, perhaps one day when the planet was back on its feet, the society would evolve, improve itself. Perhaps that too was inevitable.

'Don't know why they had to drag us out here,' Mark grumbled. He sat with a sheaf of folders on his lap. Zoe imagined he was missing his coffee. The car was comfortable but still jolted whenever it ran over a pothole in the still imperfectly repaired Marylebone Road. 'Don't see what witnessing the recruitment programme is supposed to teach us. I'm all for hands on but...'

'Yes I will,' said Zoe.

'Pardon?' He took his head out of the files.

'I said: yes I will.'

There was a moment's pause. He still didn't comprehend. And then he did. Zoe thought he might cry.

'If you still want me,' she added.

Mark laughed, once. Nerves. 'Don't be so stupid...' he said and kissed her.

It was all she could do not to dissolve into a silly little girl, like the ones back home she had always been so dismissive of.

As they passed through the final checkpoint, before the wall, he took her hand and squeezed it.

Her head was full of dreams. Children, and a long life. She found herself longing for him to hug her. It would not be easy, not by any means, but it would be enough. Mark gave her a quick kiss as they stepped from the car.

Zoe barely heard the shots from the other side of the wall. It was a long way away. Grey-clad troops in their toy-town uniforms patrolled, unworried. Apparently sixty-seven per cent of the wall, from the river to Wembley in the northwest, was now under camera surveillance. Keeping the anarchy at bay. She had heard about Mad Mackenzie on the other side. The last remnant of the old UN authority. The dregs of a long-disappeared government. He was supposed to have fantasies about the end of the world. At this moment, Zoe couldn't have cared less.

The February wind had risen and blew cold over the razed perimeter. A few wooden stumps protruding from the concrete flags were all that remained of the old Hyde Park. Even the desolation gave Zoe hope. One day they might grow trees and grass there again.

Mark was still grumbling. 'Bloody waste of time.'

'It's the new analysis proposals,' she said. 'Part of this new audit.'

'I know, I know. That's what they *say*. They obviously want to show off some new toy or something.' He was smiling, so the grumpiness was an act. An image of the Doctor doing exactly the same thing flashed through her mind. It cut like a knife.

Was Jamie still alive? Out there? Perhaps in time, she would be able to find out.

In the meantime, she would have to learn to control these pangs of withdrawal.

Mark waved away the officer's salute as they stepped from the car. She noticed the soldiers made him nervous. The wall stretched left to right without end.

She hadn't seen much of these troops in the last six months. They generally operated away from the centre of the City. The officers were all Execs. Naturally inclined towards action and aggression, there was great kudos to be gained from bringing back loot from far-off climes. There was talk, Zoe knew, of generating a standing army again.

Not that Mark had any interest in such boys' games. It offended his sense of culture, his need to believe in the rebirth of civilisation.

The officer, an old lag judging by the pockmarks on his face, nodded his acknowledgement of their arrival. Two guards escorted them as they walked. Zoe thought, if division were to occur in the City it would stem from the military.

She felt odd back at the wall, as if she was closing in on some physical part of her that remained on the other side. She recalled that nightmare climb up the gantry, her last view of the Doctor's prone body, his head leaking red. She hated the Centre and everyone in it. Even now: this rage. She took Mark's hand to help calm her. He looked at her. Concerned.

She wondered how long he had been worrying about her. How long he had been thinking about his proposal. She felt warm and needed, something she had never expected again.

They reached the concrete bunker. The officer opened the doors. Zoe was thinking of a suitable date and that she would have to find a reliable source for coffee. As they were led down the steps, she caught a quick glimpse of a battered Marble Arch up to the north. It was reassuring that they'd kept some things standing.

Once inside, the bunker was deserted. This obviously upset Mark. Perhaps, like her, he had been expecting a whole host of heavily armed guards doing something parade-ish.

'What is this, Captain?' he asked.

The officer raised his pistol and shot him through the heart. Before shock registered, Zoe realised he had been fitting a silencer all through their descent down the stairs.

Mark hit the floor with a muffled thud. Her world had fallen with him.

‘No,’ she murmured. It was all that could come out.

‘Bring her,’ said the officer. He was an old man with cruel eyes. Zoe understood he had enjoyed killing Mark. A cloth was clamped on to her face and once again she smelt the sweet stench of chloroform.

PART FOUR

Extract from *Message is Clear* by Neville Verdana

It started with the UFOs. A single sighting over the Indian Ocean. Then more: Asia, the Antarctic, South America. Malignant spinning tops, almost alive with an insane energy. Finally, we bagged one. In the wreckage: human bodies. Despite the odd angles and planes that made up their perverse design, these UFOs had been constructed on Earth. Were they transport ships? We could only guess. Our only clue came in the bodies. They had been... altered. The old legends of abduction came to mind. Something was studying us.

The attacks started. The pattern was always the same: one or two key members of a specialist security or community outfit suddenly went berserk. They were caught sabotaging key equipment. Maximum damage with the minimum of effort. Many were discovered in time, many were not. The Shiners.

Then, something else. Someone else.

He showed up again. Back from the moon. A graveyard in northern France.

A squad of crack PRISM ground troops assigned to track a landed UFO found Captain Karl Taylor instead. Waiting for them in the night. None survived the encounter.

The team I had suddenly taken charge of scoured recovered video footage, not believing our eyes. He seemed to be the same man. Close scrutiny proved otherwise. His facial terrain was subtly different to the real Taylor - over-exaggerated features gave him the aura of a Mr Hyde to the original's Doctor Jekyll. Taylor's skin was pale and waxy, his eyes black and lifeless. The same but different. It was the Myloki's first attempt to recreate a human being.

This body did not radiate heat - infrared couldn't detect him at all. In fact, for all intents and purposes, Captain Taylor was dead.

Well, he wasn't dead. Not exactly.

PRISM had encountered its first Indestructible Man.

VIII

All right, it was done.

Bishop was watching the Patient almost continuously. Long nights at his desk smoking and drinking, glaring at the TV monitor, watching the little man pace and mutter. Bishop was aware he was being jerked around. The Patient wanted his friends found so he had to find them. An agonising wait until this panned out.

It was too much for Bishop to consider he had made a mistake. He found himself considering it anyway. What if the Patient and his friends weren't what he had decided they had to be?

What if there was some other ridiculous but true reason for their presence?

No. There could be no other reason.

This bizarre trio had to be the Myloki. They fitted too neatly. The Patient had recovered from a fatal injury thanks to alien physiology, Bishop had seen it happen. Fact. Which meant there was no other possibility.

Bishop wondered whether he was hoping this was the return. Something to break the tension. If that were so, his authority as head of SILOET was in serious jeopardy. To wish that was psychotic.

It was the nature of the Patient that didn't make sense. A whole team of psychologists had studied him and the only definite statement they could make was to repeat Doctor Koslovski's earlier statement. Either the Patient was very clever or he was very stupid. He wandered around his cell scribbling nonsensical equations in a notepad, or sat cross-legged examining his feet. Very often he recited the poetry of Dante, seeming to enjoy the sound of his own voice.

His physical condition was apparently totally normal, apart from the alien blood and two hearts and a dozen other impossibilities.

The Patient had to be a new style of replica, perhaps one that had gone wrong.

The others, the other two, weren't anything like him. They were human, and nowhere near indestructible. One was a burnt-out shell, the other a tortured neurotic.

Bishop sat back in his padded chair, wondering just what kind of game these pieces were needed for.

Two seconds later he woke up. Micro-sleep. He really was exhausted. How long had it been since he'd left the Centre? Since he'd seen daylight?

Getting the two companions back had been an incredible risk. What was more incredible was that they were both still alive. Alive and, according to his sources, both able to work their way up through two different societies into positions of responsibility.

The retrievals had not come without repercussions. There was now a very real possibility of open war with the very people his organisation was pledged to protect.

The boy was in confinement having suffered a total nervous collapse. Violent at first, extremely violent, and now catatonic. It fitted.

The girl had gone to the other extreme. Since her extraction, personally handled by Alex Storm, she had twice attempted suicide. She was in the medical wing, under sedation. Neither knew the Patient was alive.

They had to be the key, the way into the Patient and his secrets.

It was time.

Bishop sat up. He'd had enough of waiting. It was time to begin the game.

Bishop faced the cross-legged Patient. 'We have them,' he said.

'Mm?' came the only reply. The little dark-haired man who had to be the vanguard of the new Myloki invasion seemed

remarkably unperturbed. Irritatingly unperturbed. How could he ever have thought the Patient had a face you could lose in a crowd?

‘Your friends. The boy and the girl.’

‘Ah.’ He stared at Bishop with those meek eyes. There was fierce intelligence there. And anger. The Patient had healed.

‘Why don’t you at least tell me your name,’ Bishop asked. He decided to match the coolness, the intelligence. ‘Go on. Give me that.’

‘Can I see them? Where are they?’

‘Tell me your name and we can start discussing that.’

‘I am the Doctor.’

‘I said your name.’

Bishop watched him take a deep breath. ‘That *is* my name.’

‘The Doctor?’

‘Yes.’

Under guard, the Doctor was led into one of the secure rooms. Bishop showed him the images of Macrimmon and Zoe. With time codes to prove the footage was live.

‘Oh my,’ said the Doctor, and even Bishop softened. ‘What have they done to you?’ He touched the glass screen softly.

‘Take him back,’ said Bishop and the guards moved in.

‘Oh do I have to?’ asked the Doctor. His emotional restraint caught them all by the surprise. He was a quiet, sensitive academic now. ‘It’s so tedious in that cell. I’m not going to run away. I don’t even know where I am.’ He looked at his entourage, dwarfed by their numbers and bulk. The ghost of a grin. ‘And I promise not to hurt you.’

Bishop nodded and the guards backed away. ‘All right,’ he asked. ‘What do you want?’

The clown face tightened in concentration. Bishop found himself drawn in, despite himself. If he was a plant, he was a bloody good one. You just couldn’t help liking him. Perhaps that was what the Myloki intended.

The Doctor looked at him and smiled. ‘You know, I would love a cup of tea. If there’s one going.’

Now he was pacing the reception area. An armed Alex Storm was watching him, amused. They had given the Doctor his old clothes back. A strange concoction of frock coat and baggy checked trousers and even an old battered pair of shoes he insisted on wearing instead of the specially designed SILOET slippers.

Bishop felt odd giving a prisoner so much leeway. But it had worked with Captain Matthews. Reawaken the routines, jump-start the human memories. Bishop had learnt Commander LeBlanc's reports by heart a decade ago. It was all they had to go on.

'I would very much like to know why you decided to shoot me. I was only trying to escape.' The Doctor was playing yet another new role: the outraged teenager.

Alex coughed. It sounded suspiciously like stifled laughter.

'What do you remember from your old life?' Bishop asked, again according to the reports. 'Anything. Something you did. A picture. A wife.'

'My old life?' asked the Doctor.

'Your previous... existence.'

The Doctor looked startled. 'That is going back a long way.' He scratched his head. 'Well, Daleks of course. A junkyard, of sorts. Ian, Barbara. Big insects. Doc Holliday. A base under the snow.' He looked mournfully at Bishop, then at Alex. 'It's not really the sort of thing you're after, is it?'

He let the Doctor visit his friends. What else was there left to do? He even let him go in alone.

First, the girl. The Doctor was looking at Bishop as he unlocked the door to her room. 'Thank you,' he said softly.

Bishop stayed quiet. There was a lack of guile he found unnerving.

The Doctor walked in.

Clearly, this room had some kind of medical function.

His strange recovery was still puzzling him. His body chemistry must have undergone some reaction to the gubbins they'd pumped into him. Enough to stop him - *it*

happening. To halt the change. And something else. A half-remembered dream - falling through space on and on until... a meeting.

He wasn't sure himself how he felt, or what had happened. In such cases, it was best to wait and see.

They had put her in a bed. Restraining straps. As ever, the sight of such devices made him angry. The first thing he would do was cut her loose. He checked the ceiling. Yes, they had cameras. He was not alone.

Zoe lay in the bed, nothing more than a little bobbed head of hair poking up in the gloom. Commander Bishop had told him she was sedated; what she had tried to do to herself. How could she ever consider such an act? What terrible sights must she have seen?

'My dear...' he said. He stroked her young face. Guilt stroked his insides.

Zoe's eyes flickered and opened. She looked up. He hoped the shock wouldn't be too much.

She didn't seem to see him at first. Then her eyes widened in disbelief. He was a delusion, a vision caused by the sedatives.

'No...' she whispered.

The Doctor put a finger to her lips. 'Yes.' He smiled. 'I'm ever so pleased to see you.'

Tears in her eyes. She knew it was him all right. 'How?'

'I'll tell you everything. But you must promise me, you must, that you will never do anything like this again.' He held her damaged arms, clumsily trying to undo the straps.

'They killed him. Mark.'

'Let's untangle you here...'

'He loved me, Doctor. He said so. We were going to... going to...' she drifted away again.

'If I could have helped you, I would. And I always will.'

Zoe was half asleep now, fighting unconsciousness. 'Doctor.'

He pulled the straps free. 'I'm here, Zoe. I always will be.'

Then, the boy. A tougher proposition. And a big blow to him.

Bishop wouldn't let him in alone this time. The guards knew what Macrimmon was capable of.

At first, the boy didn't react to the Doctor's presence at all. Just sat in his chair, his face pale; tension lines traced across his face, restraining mask over his mouth. He wouldn't look at those standing over him.

The Doctor just stared, appalled. Bishop saw the energy drain from his body.

'Oh Jamie, I'm sorry.'

The boy looked up at him. 'Go away,' he mumbled through the mask.

The Doctor sighed. 'Jamie...'

'You're not the Doctor. It's a trick. You're one of those doubles, Mr Mackenzie told me.'

'I don't know who this Mr Mackenzie is, Jamie,' said the Doctor. 'But I assure you that I am definitely me.'

'You're dead.' He looked the Doctor up and down. 'You're not the Doctor. I want to go back.'

Bishop placed a hand on the Doctor's arm. 'I think that's...'

The Doctor shrugged him aside. 'Jamie!' Bishop felt the anguish in this single word. It cut right through him. He remembered his wife, and when he had spoken her name in the same tone. Helen.

Macrimmon looked up. Bishop saw the hate in his eyes. 'Go away. If I see you again...'

The Doctor stepped back. 'Jamie.'

The boy smiled cruelly through his mask. The Doctor could see the pain in the action. 'I'll kill you.'

And that was that.

IX

A knocking on his cubicle door startled him from sleep. Bishop groaned. His clock said 0300 in glowing green numbers. 'Helen?' The word on his lips from an already forgotten dream. 'Hal?' came Alex's voice from outside. 'You awake?' His first thought was that the waiting was over, that the time had come. *They* were on their way. 'What's happened?'

Alex flicked a light on. Bishop blinked. He realised he could still panic, like a child.

He sat up. Not yet, he thought. Not while I've breath in my body. 'They're ready,' said Alex. 'What about you?' Alex nodded.

Bishop showered and creaked into his dress uniform. This was as official as they came. Alex was waiting outside his cubicle when he stepped out. They marched in tandem to the lifts. 'How about you, Alex?' he asked. 'Are you ready?'

'You still have a chance,' said Alex. 'You might still be right.'

'But you don't think so.'

Alex gently stabbed the lift button. Always polite, always calm. 'I never did,' he said.

The tribunal had not been given much time to assemble. But assemble they had.

Bishop sat at the head of the conference table and faced his accusers. The same twelve men he had so confidently addressed six months ago. The light was soft, but he had no trouble making out heads. Captain Martin, Captain Adams watching from his AV studio up on Lunar Base and even Captain Drake - hooked in on video-link aboard KINGFISHER, their suborbital submarine launcher. Drake

blinked once on the huge screen, clearly not seeing him. Audio only at his end.

‘Gentlemen,’ said Bishop. ‘Let’s begin.’

The shadowy operatives gazed at him. There was no embarrassment, no emotion, merely a commitment to procedure. And procedure demanded cool logical heads.

‘I’m sorry about the hour. You’ll have to forgive me.’ He looked around. On the screen, Captain Drake blushed. He was young, the youngest of the SILOET executive officers.

‘There is only one item on the agenda,’ Bishop continued. ‘My fitness to command this organisation. I no longer entirely trust my own judgement. This is the question: am I correct in my actions concerning our prisoner? This... Doctor?’

He looked around. The faces in their half-lights were stern. They knew what was at stake. However, it needed putting on record. Bishop cleared his throat. ‘If you decide my judgement is flawed I will, according to Article Sixteen of our constitution, resign my post as commander-in-chief of SILOET.’

The preliminaries were over. Alex was nominated Accuser. To outline the case against Bishop. Again, the 2IC took no pride in his display. It was possible he didn’t even want Bishop to go down. But if that became necessary, Alex Storm would do his duty. No question.

‘You all know the background to this business,’ Alex began. ‘This isn’t a court of law so I don’t think we need to go through its history in detail. Under Commander Bishop’s orders, SILOET has effected the recovery and survival of the Doctor, believing him to be an insurgent sent by the Myloki. We have also extracted the other two insurgents and returned them to this Centre. In doing so, we have compromised many long-term penetration operations into our two major local communities. The cost of this disruption may well be severe. Sources indicate that both forces are mobilising for violent assault on this headquarters.’

Security Captain Bain leant forward. ‘I would like to put on record that both attacks, should they occur, will fail. Neither the London Militia under Mackenzie, nor the City Republic,

possess the appropriate weaponry to mount a successful offensive.’ He sat back again, trying to conceal his smug satisfaction. He was probably right, thought Bishop.

‘At this stage,’ Alex continued, ‘the Doctor has regained his health. He appears to be perfectly fit both mentally and physically.’ He looked over at the nervous, fidgeting Doctor Koslovski, who nodded vigorously.

‘A miracle. Still we do not know how this has been achieved,’ said the Russian. At a glance from Alex, Koslovski shut up, blinking. Probably trying to remember what not to say, thought Bishop.

‘Nevertheless,’ said Alex, ‘it does not necessarily follow that they, the Myloki, are responsible for this man, nor his entry on to SKYHOME and consequently this headquarters. In fact, it is entirely possible that Commander Bishop is wrong, with dire consequences for our organisation.’

There it was, the question he’d been asking himself for six months. The question he had now put on to a public platform. The question that could end his career.

And put the way Alex put it, Bishop realised he was sunk. There was no proof. Not a shred. He felt words of explanation bubble up, but this was not the time. He would have his chance. This wasn’t a direct attack. His colleagues had every right to pull in the leash. They’d let it out a long way for him.

‘Without further proof, it is the right of this tribunal to remove Commander Bishop from his post and to elect a new commander-in-chief. Charges of gross misconduct would be pressed at some later date. Commander Bishop would consider himself under arrest. Every officer in SILOET is aware of these strictures and will act according to his duty. I take it you are aware of this, Commander?’

Bishop nodded. He knew well enough.

‘Do you stand by your actions?’ asked Alex, almost as a ritual.

‘I do.’

‘For the record, I must add that I am aware of your... activities with your private research department down on Sub-Level 3. You have revealed some of its dealings

voluntarily to me. Are you willing to divulge the whole purpose of this research project to the tribunal?’

‘I am not. Should I be found guilty, all details of this project will be passed over to my replacement.’

Alex looked at everyone in the room in turn. ‘I will now ask Commander Bishop to account for his actions. At the conclusion of his defence, you will all be required to vote. If the result of that vote is anything less than a unanimous agreement to retain Commander Bishop as the commander, he will be asked to step down. Do you all understand?’

A dozen nods. Alex sat back in his chair.

‘Very well Commander,’ he said. ‘Your turn.’

Bishop stood, aware of the gazes on him.

‘Gentlemen. I will try not to keep you any longer than I have to. Let me say this: I believe in the principles upon which SILOET was founded. The first of these principles is trust. Absolute trust.’

The darkened figures were silent, almost immobile. He couldn’t read them at all. He felt exposed. ‘However, absolute trust does not necessarily mean absolute openness. What it means is that you have faith in my judgement. With my ability to command. And this ability goes beyond feet and evidence. It also may, at times, go beyond logical thought. To be an effective commander, I will sometimes have to rely on instinct. A good, old-fashioned hunch. You must trust me when I say that I know that the Myloki will return. I have not a single doubt in my mind. I know why they must. I will not divulge that information to you. Not yet. However, if you as a body decide you can no longer trust me, and I step down, which I will, you will have condemned the Earth to death. It’s as simple as that.’

He paused, let his words sink in. ‘I don’t propose to waste anyone’s time.’ He looked at Alex, returning that cold stare. ‘Bring the Doctor here. Let’s sort this out once and for all.’

They heard him before they saw him. He was protesting, and vigorously too. ‘This is an outrage!’ he blustered from the

corridor outside. 'Where are you taking me? It's the middle of the night!'

The doors swung open and two guards jostled the Doctor into the conference room. He looked very small and ragged. Seeing him, Bishop suddenly questioned the wisdom of his own actions.

The Doctor looked around. Within an instant, defiance turned to a deferential smile. 'Oh my, this is all rather daunting, isn't it.' He was all innocence.

Strange, thought Bishop. Without any apparent effort, all attention was now fixed firmly on him. This odd little man who had given him so much grief.

'What's the matter, cat got your tongues?' he barked. 'What's so important you had to drag me out of bed at this hour?'

Someone laughed in the dark, so ridiculous was the Doctor's posturing. On the screen Captain Drake was pressing his earpiece to his head, trying to work out what was happening.

'You are here to answer questions,' said Alex. His voice was even and cold.

'Oh, is it a quiz?' asked the Doctor. His smile was utterly disingenuous.

The Doctor produced a billowing white handkerchief from somewhere in his jacket pocket and mopped his brow. 'It's not going to be hard is it? I haven't had time to cram.'

Alex stood. 'Doctor! I advise you to treat this tribunal seriously.'

Chastened, the Doctor shoved the handkerchief back into the pocket. 'Well,' he sulked. 'You know it's not easy recalling things, especially when one has been shot in the brain. One tends to develop rather a selective memory, if you take my meaning.' He gave Alex a look that managed to consist of both lack of guile and uncompromising deviousness. Bishop felt the man was an oxymoron - two opposite personalities at once. Or it could have been just a moron.

'Doctor,' said Alex. 'We are here to solve the riddle that you present to us. We must do this tonight.'

He was defiant again. ‘And why should I help you? What have you ever done for me?’

‘We could have you executed,’ snarled Bain.

‘Ah, but you’ve already tried that, haven’t you. Why should that bother me?’

Alex sat back in his seat, as relaxed as if at the theatre. ‘We’d all be interested to know how you managed to stay alive.’

‘My dear fellow, if I could tell I would. I suspect that whatever you used to stabilise my condition had some kind of effect on my metabolism. A suppressant. A nasty one. For a while, I didn’t feel entirely myself...’ He thought for a moment, as if his words were a significant surprise to him. He looked up. ‘But I’m all better now, thank you for asking...’

‘Enough,’ said Bain. The spell was broken. ‘We’re wasting time.’

‘Wait; said Bishop. ‘I want to talk to him.’

‘Who?’ asked the Doctor, looking around. ‘Oh me. Sorry.’

Alex waved a hand, still affecting deep unconcern. Which meant he was well and truly furious. ‘All yours,’ he said.

Bishop stood up. ‘Doctor,’ he said. ‘I have a question for you.’

‘Oh yes?’ the Doctor replied, wary of a trap.

Bishop took a deep breath. ‘There was a man. A long time ago. Who worked for one of this organisation’s predecessors. A “scientific advisor” who, like you, had no name. Just a title: the Doctor. A man who fought with UNIT against the early extraterrestrial incursions. Is it possible that you could be that man?’

The Doctor looked at Bishop. The half-smile on his face could have meant anything. ‘Do you really think that’s possible?’ he replied. At that moment, Bishop felt as if the scatter-brained tramp was a shell, just a shape, concealing power, great power. Even the lights appeared to be dim in his presence. All that could be clearly seen were the Doctor’s eyes. ‘I would remember wouldn’t I? Are you really suggesting I am over a hundred years old?’ The Doctor spoke softly, lulling his audience...

Bishop saw the tribunal members nodding in their seats. They seemed relaxed. Almost hypnotised.

‘Gentlemen,’ he said and watched as they bobbed awake again. ‘Try and stay with us.’

The Doctor’s innocent smile would have shamed a Dickensian waif.

Bishop stood and walked over to him. ‘You must know by now that we believe you to be a replica.’

‘Oh no, there’s only one of me, I can assure you.’

‘A new kind of replica. Created by the Myloki to breach our organisation.’

‘If you believe that... well, I didn’t make a very good job of it, did I? Getting shot straight away.’

‘Do you deny you possess incredible powers of physical regeneration?’

The Doctor shuffled. ‘I don’t like to talk about it. And don’t ask me to explain it because you simply won’t believe me.’

Bishop almost had him. ‘Doctor, your EEG patterns match exactly the phased EEG patterns of other humans destroyed and replicated by the Myloki! How can you explain that?’

The Doctor closed his eyes. He seemed to know where this was leading. His head dropped. ‘I can’t. I don’t even know who this “Myloki” is.’ He looked up again, as if he’d had a bright idea. ‘You don’t have another name for them, do you? Perhaps that’s the problem?’

‘Something of a coincidence isn’t it, Doctor?’

The Doctor nodded. ‘I suppose it is.’

‘So, despite all evidence to the contrary,’ Bishop decided to start summing up, ‘you deny that you are in any way affected by the Myloki, and that they are coming back?’

The Doctor was silent. He appeared deep in thought.

Bishop turned to face the tribunal. ‘So, gentlemen. Here we are. Back to where I began. I say this man is sent by our enemy. I know this but I cannot prove it. I am acting on a hunch and I am aware that a hunch may not be enough. The time has come for us... for you... to decide. Just be aware. Don’t risk being melodramatic while the fate of the world is in your hands.’

Alex stood up. ‘Commander,’ he said, respectful. The assembled company shuffled in their seats. ‘Gentlemen,’ Alex continued. ‘We must vote now. You have seen this... infiltrator for yourselves. You have heard him speak. And I am sorry, Commander, but this “Doctor” is not a Myloki agent. You are wrong. They are not coming back.’

He let his words sink in.

‘I propose, with regret...’ he looked at Bishop and dammit, he did look regretful. They weren’t going to give him a chance at all. ‘I propose we revoke the command. Effective immediately. A show of hands will be enough.’

‘I deny nothing,’ said the Doctor.

Alex stopped, his expression locked into place. ‘What did you say?’

There was a rustle of movement in the room. Something in the Doctor’s words had unsettled them all.

‘I know they’re coming back,’ he said, sounding like he was surprising himself.

Bishop couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

The Doctor looked up at the ceiling. ‘They called to me. They are coming.’

X

He was reading and didn't hear her come in.

'Doctor?' whispered a shocked voice. A voice he recognised.

Where was he? The same old reception area with its bland furnishings. Of which he was becoming mightily sick. If they kept him here any longer, he'd redecorate the place himself.

Taking a deep breath, he faced her. Zoe. Up and walking.

She was dressed in a simple, white trouser suit and apart from a little sallow tinge in the complexion, and the fact that she needed a good haircut, his friend and companion was looking like her old self again. Or was that young self?

'Zoe,' he said. 'It's nice to see you again.'

She was looking at him, sad. 'Doctor. I believed you were dead. I should have known better.'

He realised he should stand, so he did. After that he remembered what to do. He hugged her.

He felt her arms around him and understood she had lost some of the remote quality she had once possessed. Zoe had been growing up. 'I'm sorry about your friend,' he said. 'I understand he meant a great deal to you.'

'Yes,' she replied. 'He did. I...'

'Mm?'

'I think he was like you. A good man.'

She paused, for a long time. She was smiling but the Doctor wasn't convinced. There were wounds there and they would take a long time to heal. He would help her as best he could.

'And Jamie?' she asked.

The Doctor felt his jowls sag, always a bad sign. 'I'm afraid Jamie has been through some terrible times,' he said. 'And it will take him a little longer to recover. We must help him. Especially you, Zoe. I'm afraid he cannot accept that I am who I claim to be.'

'I don't understand.'

'He was forced to make horrible decisions. I think Jamie could only convince himself to go through with them if he was certain I was dead. When he saw me again he couldn't accept what he had done. He must go on believing I am dead. Otherwise, he fears his mind will snap. I feel sorry for him and I want to help. But I think by forcing the issue, I will only make him worse. Awful, awful.'

'And what about us?' asked Zoe. 'Where do we stand in all this?'

A pertinent question easily asked. Not so easily answered. He had thought about this long and hard. 'Zoe,' he said. 'They need our help.'

Anger darkened her face, as if a cloud had passed over the sun. 'No,' she said.

He took her hand and led her to a seat. 'This isn't going to be easy for any of us.'

She shook him off. 'Doctor, no,' she repeated. 'I... I hate them.'

'Yes, of course,' he tried to be soft, although he knew he was going to have to be very firm. 'However, this situation is not entirely of their own making. I must take a share of the blame in all that has occurred. If we hadn't left the TARDIS, if they hadn't forced us down to Earth, if we hadn't tried to escape... none of that matters any more. It is what it is. This organisation is attempting to prevent the annihilation of the Earth. Thanks to me, an old enemy is returning. An enemy beyond their comprehension. The people here will not succeed without our help.'

'No, Doctor. I mean it. Don't talk like this. It isn't like you. I think you're still ill. You haven't recovered.'

She started to leave. The Doctor realised she was containing her anger. Anger towards him. The intensity of what she was trying to repress distressed him. He couldn't blame her.

'I need your help.'

'You're just saying that.'

'No I mean it. I really do.'

At the door, she stopped. He had got through to her. ‘What *do* you mean?’

How to put it into words? How to stress the importance?

‘It has been thirty years since the enemy was expelled. I’m not quite sure how they did it but they severed the bridge between this world and... theirs. However, the Myloki left traces - their imprint on those people they possessed and used. When the cosmic link was broken between them and the Earth, these people were abandoned. Their signals became blocked. These people became vessels, devoid of everything except their natural instincts. They call them Shiners.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘When I was shot, this organisation put some of this Shiner alien matter into my body. Somehow, this chemistry affected my natural processes. It stitched itself into my genetic structure. Again, an accident, like our arrival on SKYHOME.’

He took a deep breath, trying to get across so much information in so small a time. Also, how to remember. What remained in his memory - the vast, inhuman distance, the difference, the immensity of...

‘Something happened whilst I slept. My body chemistry was affected by the alien DNA, so much so that my metabolism rejected and eventually expelled the matter. But while it was in me, I saw something. I connected. For a while, Zoe, I became a Shiner. And the Myloki called me. From beyond space, beyond time. They are approaching.’

The Doctor prepared himself for his visit. He brushed down his frock coat and patted at his wayward hair. Always a good idea to try and look presentable. Ignoring the silent Colonel Storm, who seemed to have elected himself his permanent companion, he began to groom himself. The guard outside the Operations Room eyed him suspiciously.

He was in the middle of this grooming when the door opened. The guard snapped to attention. Commander Bishop stood there watching him. As ever, the steel blue eyes were inscrutable.

The Doctor looked up at him as if caught doing something naughty. 'Ah,' he said. 'Hello.'

'Do you want something?'

'Well, yes I do actually. May I come in?'

Deciding forthright behaviour was called for, he pushed his way past into Ops. 'Oh, I say. Very impressive.'

The room was full of boxes. Humming with the constant chatter of data and muttered orders. Ops was being stripped. Static-free lycra-suited technicians bustled and fiddled with half-packed equipment. Already, the room was down to the bare bones. It seemed that SILOET was shutting-up shop.

The Doctor walked through the throng. In a far corner, tucked away, was a door stencilled 'Commander H. Bishop'. The Doctor wondered what the 'H' stood for.

As he walked, he noticed that the Commander was noticing him noticing all the data that was running across the remaining television screens. At one point, the Doctor stopped to nudge politely aside a technician reading from a ticker-tape telex. The technician protested, until Commander Bishop silenced him.

The Doctor studied the information on the tape, nodded, then started studying again. In the background, the technician mouthed obscenities.

'You have deep-space monitoring?' asked the Doctor.

'SEWARD,' said Alex.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Space Early Warning And Radar Detection.'

The Doctor was impressed. 'Nice acronym.'

'Thank you.' A new deep voice boomed around the room.

The Doctor spun, confused. The Commander was looking at him, amused. He tried to work out where - the voice was coming through speakers but who was - ah...

The Doctor leant towards a short stubby microphone and pressed an illuminated button. 'I take it I have the pleasure of addressing SEWARD himself?'

Despite its monotone squawk, the voice sounded pleased with itself. 'Confirmed. Space Early Warning And...'

The Doctor interrupted. 'Yes, well. You know I've never been very fond of talking computers.' He strode away, determined not to be impressed. If he had wanted back-chat from a machine, he would have mended the TARDIS voice-interaction circuits centuries ago.

They reached the door to Commander Bishop's office. The Doctor turned to his two guardians and smiled. 'Righto,' he said. 'Let's have that chat shall we? Anyone else hungry?'

In they went.

Once they had sat down and the Doctor had helped himself to tea, a few biscuits, some sandwiches, more tea and a full roast dinner ('amazing how hungry one gets after six months on an intravenous drip - don't you think?'), he realised they were waiting for him to talk.

'Come on then Doctor,' asked Colonel Storm. 'How long before we can expect them?'

'Mm,' said the Doctor, noisily draining his mug of tea. 'Well, of course, I can't be exact.'

Storm smiled thinly. 'Of course you can't.'

'Alex,' said Commander Bishop, with the faintest hint of a reprimand.

'Why now?' Storm kept on. 'Why after all this time did they coincidentally decide to come back now?'

'I don't know. Perhaps the very act of injecting me with their matter... perhaps I provided some kind of beacon so they could find their way back.'

Colonel Storm wasn't convinced. The Doctor had known that from the start. He had only grudgingly agreed to the week's grace that the tribunal had given Commander Bishop and himself. A week to prove the Myloki were coming back.

It would have been nice to have been able to cross-reference his disturbances with those of a genuine human Shiner - one who had deliberately been affected by the Myloki - but according to the Commander they had all disappeared. A fact that did not pass the Doctor by.

He spent the first few days of his week acquainting himself with the events of thirty years ago. Very dry reading - all

reports and case studies - except for one book. The only critical study of the whole situation, albeit a sensationalist and rather lurid one. *Message is Clear - A Memory of the Secret War* by one Neville Verdana, ex-PRISM lieutenant.

With increasing fascination, the Doctor ploughed through this book. It was important to gain as many perspectives as possible.

When he had finished, he was more convinced than ever. They were coming back. And he knew why. Hence this meeting.

‘What exactly is all this fuss?’ he asked Commander Bishop. He jerked a thumb back at the Ops room.

Bishop looked at him. ‘I’ve decided to take your advice. The situation in London is potentially threatening. And I do not share my eager security chiefs optimism in our defensive capabilities.’

‘So you’re moving to your place in the sky?’

‘We are decamping to SKYHOME. yes.’

‘Sorry,’ said the Doctor. ‘Decamping. Of course.’ He gulped his tea.

‘So come on, Doctor,’ sneered Storm. ‘Let us in on the big secret. When does the party start? When do our guests arrive?’

The Doctor noticed how big and scarred his hands were. A man who enjoyed using his fists. He would be finding this waiting around intolerable.

‘I wish I could tell you, Colonel Storm, I really do. Careful what you wish for.’ He turned to Bishop. ‘What about Jamie? How is he?’

‘Bad. I’m keeping him safe and secure. He’s my guarantee.’

‘Guarantee of what?’

‘Of you.’

So, thought the Doctor, they were still playing games. ‘Commander...’

The lights in the room flashed twice. The Doctor saw Commander Bishop and Colonel Storm jump like startled cats. He saw the knowledge on their faces.

The technician the Doctor had irritated earlier was watching helplessly as lines of ticker tape spewed through his hands. His face was a sickly white.

The lights flashed again and dimmed. The Ops team girls, garish in the neon glow, were jabbering into microphones.

‘What is it?’ Bishop demanded.

‘It’s SEWARD, sir,’ said the technician, failing to keep his voice steady. ‘He’s gone offline.’ He flicked the illuminated talk-switch. ‘SEWARD! SEWARD! We have lost your signal. Please confirm. Confirm!’

Bishop looked at the Doctor, who held out his hands. ‘I didn’t touch a thing, I swear.’

‘A fault,’ snapped Storm. ‘The radio link.’

‘You mean he’s been knocked out?’ asked Bishop.

‘I don’t know, sir. We’ve just stopped receiving. Anything.’

Another technician, a woman, swung round in her seat. ‘Lunar Base confirms, Commander. All systems are completely non-operational. It’s like he’s been switched off.’

The Doctor stood up. ‘There you are, Colonel Storm. It’s started.’

‘We don’t know that. The space link is precarious. It’s always breaking down.’

The Doctor flicked the talk-switch again. A very disturbing hiss filled the air. ‘The transmitter is still operational. The link is open. There’s just nothing at the other end.’

The technician shook his head. ‘It’s not possible. There would have been some warning.’

‘No,’ said the Doctor. He turned to the assembled company, realising that the whole Ops team was watching him. ‘Something just swatted SEWARD out of the way. Something it couldn’t see or hear. I imagine it was something very big approaching very very quickly. I suggest we try and find a way of stopping it.’

He started striding back to the office. He pushed the door, then stopped, realising no one was following him. Impatiently, he said to the frozen Bishop and Storm, ‘Unless of course you have more pressing matters’

XI

It was as if the planet was waking from a long slothful sleep. As if the globe itself was sensing whatever moved implacably towards it through the dark aeons of space.

Some of the following events on the planet were to prove of great importance to the Doctor and his colleagues deep in the heart of SILOET headquarters:

First, Lunar Base spotted several flaming 'somethings' heading to Earth at frightening speed. Captain Adams barely had time to order the single seater BLOCKADE space fighters to scramble before these flames had flashed past and plummeted into the planet's atmosphere.

In his private sanctum, Mr Mackenzie covered his ears against the shrieks and wails of the multitude of Shiners dangled from the ceiling in their cages. They knew it was coming, that He was coming. The deranged creatures fought and scrabbled. Mr Mackenzie saw old yellow skin ripped and bitten, hair torn and hurled out through the cage bars. He began to howl himself, feeling solidarity with those he had saved. A Reckoning was coming. It was as if the Shiners were dancing, such was the intensity of their fury and despair. Standing beneath their glory, waiting for the time God would grant him the same touch, Mr Mackenzie threw up his arms and wailed.

He was still singing when the fireball hit. Never realising that he was not alone in his obsession.

Across the world, others had shared his vision. Others who collected the Shiners. They too were gibbering and capering and welcoming back that which had left them bereft,

unaware that they were responding to a call that had been planted in them thirty years ago.

As the damaged population of the Earth shrank away from such creatures and their bizarre capers, they remembered old rituals to protect themselves from such evil - praying, wailing, clutching sacred objects.

It was as if all the old horrors had returned to the Earth. As the deranged ones danced, the sky seemed to split open with fire. Thunderbolts hammered into the ground with tumultuous screams. The impacts raised up earth and stone and flesh and vegetation alike. People screamed and despaired. Whole communities, already reduced to subsistence levels, abandoned their homes and fled. They weren't aiming to reach anywhere in particular. They just wanted away.

Unsurprisingly, these rites and upheavals clustered in the most ancient traditional arcane sites: Haiti; the swamps and bayous of the Mississippi; the mountains of the Balkans; shadowy peaks in the Himalayas; the wastes of the Antarctic; central Congo and, most notably, somewhere in the remote Pacific Ocean where a falling ball of fire hit the sea with such force it triggered a seismic disturbance that spewed a whole island of rock up from the waves.

In the Chamber of Commerce on the banks of the River Thames, the Chairman of the City of London was addressing his shareholders. The grey-uniformed and suited audience cradled automatic weapons in their laps and wore headphones on their ears. The Chairman was summing up. In the street, tank engines were roaring.

'We have tolerated these outrages too long! Do they think they can walk in and murder and kidnap our brightest and best?

'Well, no more! This clandestine organisation at the Television Centre has held sway for too long in its arrogance. They say they protect the world. Well we must protect the world from them! It is time they faced the cold reality of the

free market! We have the weapons to take them down. Mobilise your slave armies, gentlemen. It is time they learnt about competing in a free market economy. To war!’

The Chairman stood back and accepted the applause. Shots rang round, embedding bullets into centuries-old walls.

The ground shifted, shaking the Chamber of Commerce to its foundations.

* * *

And deep inside SILOET headquarters, the Doctor, Commander Bishop, Alex Storm, Doctor Koslovski, Jamie, Zoe, the white-faced SEWARD technician and everyone else wondered whether this was the end of the world.

XII

Jamie was certain they were drugging him. All the time, his mind seemed misted over. Thoughts wouldn't join up, tiring him out with their incessant demands to be heard.

The people here were nice, although he was sure he shouldn't be thinking so. He'd had enough of this little room, with its grey bed and television set in the walls. He wanted to think about why he had failed Mr Mackenzie, but whenever he tried he went to sleep. It had to be a spell... or, what had he heard before? Drugs. Yes, that was it. Keep the word in mind.

People came to see him. Doctor Ventham and occasionally Doctor Koslovski. Jamie liked the doctors. He'd always liked doctors. Even the sawbones back home who'd cut off your leg as soon as look at you. Pulling English lead out of Highland bodies. He remembered asking for porridge and they'd brought him some.

Escape. That was another word he'd been searching for, that had been burrowing up to the surface whilst he watched yet another inane video he couldn't concentrate on. Escape was the big thing he had to try and do. Warn Mr Mackenzie that they had killed the Doctor and put someone else in his place. Maybe a robot, aye.

That was the order: escape, kill the Doctor robot and warn Mr Mackenzie.

If only he could stand.

The robot Doctor was looking at him. Jamie tried to scream. Only a moment ago he had been sitting on his bed watching the television screen and now he was here, staring up at the replica face, his arms and legs strapped tight beneath him. There was no obvious link between the two moments. There to here in the blink of an eye. How had it happened?

A rush of panic overwhelmed him. This, that never ended. He seemed to have been here for so long.

The robot Doctor pretended concern. Plastic fingers held Jamie's eyelids open.

'This sedative you're giving him, it's too much,' it said. 'For heaven's sake, he's upset enough without you disorientating him utterly. You could at least take the mask off.' Jamie trembled under the inhuman touch. He couldn't help himself tensing rigid, feeling like his bones might break.

Someone in the room Jamie couldn't see sniffed. 'That's what you get for helping,' and Jamie recognised Doctor Koslovski's voice.

The robot Doctor took his hand away. 'I'm sorry, Jamie.'

It let go and glanced at Koslovski, and Jamie saw a flash of murder in its eyes. The creature was laughing at him. How could he warn his friend? How could he warn Mr Mackenzie?

'His brain is damaged,' said Koslovski. 'Wrecked.'

The robot moved away. There was fake anger in its voice. 'You're making him worse.'

'The Commander wants him up and about. He wants him to see!'

'Jamie needs help and rest. You can't use him like this! I won't let you.'

Doctor Koslovski moved into his field of vision. Wisely, he was ignoring the robot. Instead, he prodded a spatula into Jamie's mouth through the wire mask. 'Seems to be healing nicely. Jamie, would you like to go on a little trip?'

'What did you do to his face?' asked the robot.

'He did it to himself,' Koslovski replied. 'He would have done a lot worse if we hadn't got to him.'

Under Koslovski's embrace, Jamie gradually relaxed, until he could lie back down again. He closed his eyes, shutting out the robot double. He failed to shut out the voices.

'I'm afraid he may never trust you again,' he heard Koslovski say 'I'm going to recommend to the Commander that you no longer have contact with the patient. It would be better if you stayed away. For both of you.'

Good for Doctor Koslovski! Risky though. The robot would kill him as soon as it thought it was detected. Koslovski was a good man, and also a great actor.

The robot's reply was flawless in its programmed emotion. 'How can I do that? Jamie is my friend.'

A good try, but that wasn't fooling anybody. Jamie knew the truth. He would never be fooled. But it had to stay secret, the fact that he was cleverer than the machine. Under the wire mask that fastened his mouth, and despite the stitches, Jamie smiled.

He was allowed to walk, although he was handcuffed. He still wore the mask and was escorted by two armoured security guards. He didn't recognise the corridors he was being led along until they emerged into the huge covered hangar where the Doctor had been killed. A helicopter was fluttering on the pad, making a devastating noise.

Jamie remembered what Mr Mackenzie had said about this place and the organisation that schemed within it. SILOET - those who would keep God from the people.

He felt good walking again. He felt better inside the helicopter - he had always liked flying, once he had got over his initial terror that first time... back when... from before...

Doctor Koslovski patted his shoulder, perhaps sensing the trembling threaten to break out again. He unclipped the locks on the back of the mask and pulled it away. Jamie shifted his jaw experimentally. A few clicks but all the parts seemed to work. 'You know I'm trusting you now,' said Koslovski.

As he climbed into the machine, a uniformed man squeezed a hard hat on to his head. Orange goggles were hauled over his eyes.

There was another man in the helicopter, someone Jamie had seen but didn't know who he was. A man with piercing blue eyes and vivid straight white hair. He held himself proud, with the bearing of a chief.

Jamie heard a great creaking noise from above and a bright light slowly swung into his eyes. Daylight. The first daylight on his face forever. Already Jamie felt lighter.

They lifted away and he realised he should be noting what he was experiencing. Mr Mackenzie would be very interested in that when he escaped and got to meet him again.

SILOET was weak. That was what he would tell Mr Mackenzie. They were forced to use drugs on prisoners and made robot doubles that could be spotted by anyone.

The helicopter lurched and lifted out of the Centre. The side door was closed but there was a window and Jamie could see out. The noise from the rotors was pleasantly drowning after all his weeks of hums and whispers.

Flying low over West London, Jamie could just about stretch his neck out enough to see the city passing beneath him. He felt like he was looking at a scale model of the city.

Oh he had a lot to tell Mr Mackenzie, he really did.

As the vibrations of the engines thrummed through the floor, Jamie felt free and clear for the first time in ages. He leant back against his padded seat. The guard next to him eyed him suspiciously. Jamie gave him a cheeky grin back.

A voice in his ear shocked him. Old terrors returned, until he looked around and saw Doctor Koslovski talking into a helmet microphone. There must be electronic ears in the helmets. 'How are you feeling, Jamie?'

'Where are we going?' he asked, stretching his mouth wide, enjoying the freedom.

Koslovski gave him the thumbs up. Yes, he had understood.

A new voice, an American by the sound of him, cut in on the conversation. 'We're going to the Town Hall, Jamie. We're taking you back there.'

Jamie couldn't believe what he was hearing. It had to be another trick. It made no sense. He looked round at the man who had spoken - the chief. He nodded. 'I'm Commander Bishop. I want you to see the place. I want you to see what happened.'

There were no more explanations. The helicopter began to descend. Jamie felt puzzled and slightly afraid, although he didn't want to show it. He had no idea what was going on. Surely they weren't just returning him to Mr Mackenzie. That would be too easy.

The man who called himself Bishop unbuckled a large automatic pistol. He nodded at the flight crew. 'I want everyone wearing gloves,' he ordered. 'I don't want anyone to touch anything with bare flesh.'

White dust like chalk was being driven up over the helicopter by the force of its downdraft. They landed with a sharp bump.

Doctor Koslovski forced a pair of thick airman's gloves on to each of Jamie's hands. 'We just want you to take a look, Jamie,' the voice echoed through his earpiece. 'We want to get your impressions. As soon as you're ready, we'll go straight back up.'

Jamie felt a twinge of unease. What could be outside there?

'Ready?' asked Koslovski.

'Yes,' said Jamie.

The crewman yanked the lock and hauled the door open again. White dust spewed in under the swirl from the rotors. Jamie was thankful for his goggles. The guards stood and jumped out. Jamie followed, head bowed in the dust cloud. Someone unclipped his cuffs.

Outside, the air was warm and fresh. Overhead, a spring sun was shining through clouds. Stretched ahead of Jamie was what had once been the Town Hall compound. Now it was a burnt-out skeleton where things grew that looked like the landscape of another planet. It looked like ground that had gone mad.

They allowed him to stumble across the chalky ruins. He heard Commander Bishop's voice over the din of the helicopter. 'Let him go!'

The wall surrounding the Town Hall was standing, but even from a distance Jamie could see the gaping holes being mined out by the wind. The stone had turned to sponge in

which stringy, coloured lines ran like veins. It looked like a wall of soggy blue cheese. Beyond were the remains of the huge council buildings. Only now nothing existed but their metal frames. He ducked through one of the crumbling holes in the wall and ran into the courtyard. The ground beneath his feet was soft and springy.

The whole area was covered in the white dust. Across the courtyard, shapes were forming. Dark, like stains. Growing like mould on the ruins, they looked sick, as if afflicted by some kind of blight. Jamie didn't like to look too hard.

There was a tinny ringing sound in his ears, as if he could hear these things growing.

Was this what Mr Mackenzie had been trying to call down? It couldn't be. What god could spew out this sickness?

There was one place he had to see.

He made his way across the frozen compound into the hollowed-out Town Hall itself. Jamie tried not to look at the things. His earlier thoughts of mould increased as he saw that they were growing out of other, desiccated shapes - barely shapes at all. Imprints in the dust, horribly familiar. A police helmet, a pair of boots, other more organic objects.

He heard a barked order and looked round to see the helicopter squad cautiously following him into the ruins. Jamie had forgotten all about them.

The Town Hall was worse. Under a layer of thick, crusted dust he felt the pile carpet slushy under his feet, soaked in some kind of jelly. The place was like a giant map, with decaying markers everywhere - a half- melted desk, a glass door standing in a frame surrounded by nothing, a twisted display of swollen fire extinguishers. More growing shapes.

At last he found what he was looking for. Using the stumpy remains of walls as a guide, he traced a path to Mr Mackenzie's office. The inner door had sunken in, bulging and bloated. It had fallen over one of many holes in the floor. He caught a glimpse of the stairs beneath. There. There it was.

Jamie slipped in his haste, stumbled and plunged his gloved hands into the dust, feeling the sodden carpet squirm

under his hands. It seemed to try to grasp him, like it had suckers. He stood again, fighting the urge to gag. The squad formed up around him. He saw equal revulsion on their faces.

Doctor Koslovski's masked and goggled head waggled up and down in front of him. 'Down there, Jamie?' he asked. 'What's down there?'

Jamie paused. Horror was creeping into his brain, threatening to freeze him. He saw himself standing there, and how much he had had to endure so far. It wasn't fair. He shouldn't have had to be here.

Still, he must know. Was this what Mr Mackenzie had promised him? That which he had given up all his old life for? Given up his sanity - he realised in a flash of lucidity. He repressed that emotion instantly. If he started to think that, he really would go mad.

Walking down the soft stairs, watching the dust swirl in the daylight above, Jamie started to fancy he was entering a private sanctum inside his own head. The change, the perversion to the normal architecture of his mind was reflected in the landscape around him.

The stairs were skewed, no longer entirely straight. And the smell was unbearable. Rich, sweet and pungent. The smell of disease.

'What do you think, Jamie?' asked Koslovski, picking his way down behind him. 'Does any of this mean anything to you? Is this what you expected?'

Jamie couldn't understand how Mr Mackenzie could ever have wanted this. All that effort collecting the Shiners, the things he had said to Jamie. It was supposed to be wonderful, beautiful. So how could all this be here?

The tunnel was cracked and swollen. He was almost there, the soft footsteps of the squad behind him. The stench was now unbearable. It would be almost impossible to enter the bunker.

He saw the lead-lined door ripped in half and hanging like wet cardboard from its hinges. Another shape, the disease

growing luminously out of it, lay tangled up in its frame. Crazy lights - like deep-sea fish.

Jamie looked inside. The bunker appeared like it was underwater, an ocean floor of seaweed. Dark ribbons hung down like stalactites. Encrusted cages filled with pulp creaked in the stagnant air.

In the centre, a protruding mass grew from the floor - furred and almost solid. Despite its sodden mass, Jamie could see what the shape was. A chair, all grown over. And something else, sat on it. The stink was indescribable.

He couldn't go in there. Not in a million years.

'Oh. My. God,' said Koslovski by his side. He clutched Jamie's arm, as if for support.

The figure on the chair turned towards them. It raised something clumpy, something that might once have been an arm. Jamie heard a thin moan, from a mouth full of seaweed.

Koslovski screamed and fell over. His arm sunk elbow deep into the rotten wall.

Without thinking, without any thought being possible, Jamie hauled the pistol from the doctor's holster and began firing at the horror that shouldn't, but still did live in that chair.

In the helicopter, they cuffed him again.

Jamie felt numb, swamped by the sights he had seen. Commander Bishop had tried to question him but, even without the mask, he couldn't speak. He wouldn't.

How could this be? There had to be a reason. Some way to explain the abomination he had witnessed.

Doctor Koslovski was rubbing his arm with his clean glove. Along with Commander Bishop and all the others in the helicopter, he was silent and shocked.

Or was he?

Jamie averted his eyes, in case the doctor could read his mind.

He thought about the Doctor, the real Doctor, and some of the clever enemies they had faced together. Clever. Clever and sneaky.

Perhaps that diseased place was not quite what it seemed. Perhaps it had been *arranged*...

After all, if they could design a robot Doctor specifically to trick him, maybe they could do this too. A sham, to rob him of his belief in Mr Mackenzie.

An image of the moving shape in the chair rose up in his mind. Jamie pushed it firmly away.

Aye. Perhaps that was it. This was another one of their little shows, put on for his benefit. Monsters and the like, to put the willies up him and make him crack.

Well, Jamie Macrimmon had their game. His mother didn't raise a stupid Highlander. They wouldn't catch him that easily. Oh no.

'Are you all right, Jamie?' asked Koslovksi, looking sick himself. The helicopter began its descent into the Centre.

'Oh aye,' said Jamie. 'Don't worry about me.'

Finally, Zoe. He didn't know what to make of Zoe. Had they got to her?

Jamie guessed they were drugging him again. Now he was back in the grey room. He felt so placid, so calm. However, nothing would interfere with his determination. They would never break him, never. And one day when the chance came, he would find a way to hurt them. Find a way to kill them.

Zoe looked at him with big, sad eyes. He thought about Victoria. He missed Victoria. Jamie could speak now, but most times he liked to stay silent.

'Jamie,' Zoe was saying, 'they want to take you away from here. The Doctor and I, we think it's for the best.'

She wiped away the tears from her eyes. Jamie began to think about his pipes, how much he had enjoyed playing. Strong tunes, a call to arms.

'Jamie, you must never think we're leaving you, never. You'll be safe where you're going. Safe. But never believe for a moment you're on your own.'

Unbidden, a tune was growing louder in his memory. Something strong. Oh yes. He listened.

‘Jamie, please. If just once you could come back to us. Remember... remember what it used to be like. The Doctor is alive! He really is. It is him.’

‘Bonnie Dundee’, that was the name of it. One of his favourites. For old General Jimmie Claverhouse. Bonnie Dundee was his nickname; it was his song for the first battle against the English. The one at Killiecrankie...

‘Jamie.’ Zoe could hardly speak now, through her tears. ‘Oh, Jamie..’

Hearing the call to battle ringing in his ears, he couldn’t resist the urge. He began to hum.

Extract from *Message is Clear* by Neville Verdana

The war ended when Colonel LeBlanc took a frightening gamble. After years of research, of study, it was deduced that the Myloki had to be controlling their slaves from a point of singularity.

Signals were being transmitted into their brains - I don't know how, but I do know what. A radio wave capable of being received by the treated mind. We had enough of them in captivity and studied them left right and centre. For a while, presumably for as long as the Myloki thought they were useful, we found increased brain activity on certain wave frequencies, leading to frenzied but organised behaviour. They were having their minds changed for them. New orders.

Transmitted signals have to be transmitted from somewhere. We just needed to find out where.

It sounds absurd but the answer was ridiculously simple. The moon. The original base believed destroyed by Captain Taylor. They were still there.

This was Colonel LeBlanc's big risk. As the sabotage and acts of terrorism reached crisis level around the world, including the infamous New York meltdown, a small orbital was launched from the PRISM space site in the Shanghai province. On board were four men: pilot, co-pilot, Captain Adam Nelson, Captain Grant Matthews.

The latter with a twenty megaton nuclear bomb strapped to his back.

This time, no sensor readings were transmitted on approach to the Myloki 'outpost'. I believed that it had been those very signals that had activated whatever lay there in the first place. This 'base' could even originally have been a natural phenomenon - a place between worlds where the wall that separates *us* from *them* had worn thin.

As the Orbital rocket closed in on the coordinates, the pilot, Captain William Gray, reported some activity in the area. An undefined number of crashed UFOs. There was evidence of a structure buried beneath the moon's surface. A large structure. They had been busy.

Contact was lost. The next anyone knew was when PRISM satellite trackers beamed the explosion back to us. Suddenly, all our detection equipment, which had been scrambled and negated for years by a force we could never locate, winked back into operation.

A low-lunar-orbit satellite crossed the target area to reveal the giant billowing dust cloud spreading out in slow motion from the impact crater. The nuclear bomb had been detonated.

Myloki activity dropped to zero. The Shiners in captivity dropped over - their strings cut.

Even Captain Taylor, now captured and imprisoned, stopped producing any kind of life-signs. He was at last truly dead.

Nothing existed on the moon except our own rudimentary Lunar Base. Of Captain Grant Matthews, not a trace could be found. Not that anyone really wanted to walk into the middle of a half-mile-deep radiation-drenched crater to find out. He was gone, as were the enemy.

It was all over.

XIII

The first of the transport jets was taking off. Equipment containers and technicians, ready for the re-booting of SKYHOME.

He was finding the emergency exciting, there was no doubt of that. He had been waiting for this for twenty-eight years, despite his transparent self-denial. This was the last stand. A final battle that humanity had to win or else go out of business.

He led Alex down into the lowest levels of the Centre. At last, his number two was going to find out what he had been up to all these years.

‘I don’t like giving the Doctor this much freedom,’ Alex said as they marched.

Bishop shrugged. ‘You were the one who told me he was the saviour of mankind.’

No smile. Alex was feeling the heat. ‘I never said that. And I don’t trust him. Or the girl.’

They reached the door to the laboratory. Before they went through the checks, Bishop turned to Alex. ‘We have the boy. Okay, he’s a lunatic, but the Doctor has an emotional attachment to him. He’s our insurance. Besides...’

‘What?’ Alex was irritable, anxious to get into the lab. Out of character.

‘You really think a Myloki agent could eat like that?’

An orange light flashed on, indicating the floor was secure. ‘Anyway,’ Bishop continued, ‘I think his plan might work. My plan.’

‘So you say,’ said Alex. ‘Until I know what it is, I don’t like it.’

Once inside, and with the nervous Professor Graham looking over them, Bishop unlocked the door to the safe that contained the key to the defeat of the Myloki.

Even Alex was stunned. 'My God,' he whispered.

Bishop breathed deep with pride. 'I was planning to unveil it when I put myself on trial. See how the Doctor liked it. But he managed to finesse us all.'

Alex couldn't take his eyes off the thing. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'We'll get our own back.'

The Doctor announced his plan with his usual tact and diplomacy. He demanded a special meeting in Bishop's office and stated that there was only one way to prevent the invasion - his way.

As if Bishop hadn't enough to worry about. He had refused the Doctor's request, and spent his time in Ops, trying to find a way out of this mess.

There was movement in the City.

Bishop guessed the only reason they had not yet already moved on the Centre was that they were scared. Their rulers presumably believed that SILOET had wiped out Mackenzie's mob with a powerful secret weapon. Any close inspection of the ruins would soon dispel that notion. A society as voracious as the City wasn't going to stay scared long. Already, the grey gangs had been sniping at his investigation team. A considerable assault was inevitable.

More worrying was the blast site itself. If blast it had been.

Bishop had been to the disaster area and he found the whole phenomenon difficult to comprehend. One's senses seemed unable to take in the devastation. The horror.

Macrimmon's visit had yielded little but confirmation that he was deeply traumatised. The cellar was obviously where Mackenzie had been keeping his collection of Shiners. The idea that the Town Hall was a focal point had been raised, then confirmed by reports of other hits around the globe. Florida, the Congo, Nepal, Antarctica.

Adams up on Lunar Base had sent down images of the odd streaks of fire shot in from space. From whatever it was that had disabled SEWARD and was now on its way here.

'Why can't we spot them?' Bishop asked, almost rhetorically, as he snapped the com-link off. 'Why won't our

instruments pick them up?’ He had moved into Ops, overseeing six technicians stripping SEWARD’s computer links, trying to isolate the cause of the problem.

Unnoticed, the Doctor seemed to just appear beside him. ‘Perhaps you’re not looking in the right place.’

‘What do you mean? SEWARD had every possible detection technology... he was the most advanced AI space-screening processor ever invented.’

The Doctor tapped his head. ‘Not all space is outer space, Commander. There are other places.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Dark places. Other places, beyond us. Not meant for us.’ He started to pace the room, as if caught up in his own thought processes. He seemed unaware of his rapt audience. ‘Not moving closer,’ he said. ‘Rather, moving *through*. From another place, to this place.’

The technician once in charge of SEWARD looked cynical. ‘What, are you talking about other dimensions?’

The Doctor’s face was bright with conjecture. ‘Perhaps they never really went away. Just lay dormant. Observing us with different, unknowable eyes.’

He smiled, realising the SILOET personnel were watching him. ‘Of course, I may be totally wrong.’ He coughed in the silence. Uncertainly, the Doctor gestured them to their consoles. ‘Come on, come on,’ he said. ‘Back to work.’ His face had gone bright red.

Bishop woke up. He blinked, looking around at his darkened room. He had been dreaming of Helen again.

He felt something wet on his face. Tears.

This was going to be a rough night; the black dog was here. Depression, despair, the hopelessness of his position.

What had all his work been for? What had he achieved with SILOET except to have it reviled by what remained of civilisation?

He was aware of where he stood with the last of the governments. An open secret regarded with fear and jealousy. The last of any decent resources stolen and used up by his

little organisation. No wonder the City wanted to bring them down. They'd been watching him long enough.

Bishop thought about the people he'd had killed, the reputations he had ruined, the communities he had wrecked. What had he done?

Faces from the past came back to him in the night. Colonel LeBlanc, ground down and crippled by total war, the lifeless boogeyman mask of Taylor, Neville Verdana. Long gone now.

As full consciousness returned. Bishop began to manage the ghosts that leered at him out of the dark. He recognised them for what they were: manifestations of his own guilt. It had been a long, hard road. He felt he had the names carved into his heart.

Apart from Grant Matthews. The lonely man whom fate had made indestructible. A ghost too, perhaps, but a living one. A man he himself had sentenced to death.

Are you still here? Bishop asked himself. Are you still here?

'So, Doctor?' he asked. 'What's this great scheme of yours?'

The Doctor stared across the conference table, fingers pressed to his lips. Always that glint of amusement in his eyes, as if he was a schoolboy on a trip, playing at being important. He made the austerity of the room seem unnecessary and extravagant, just the two of them in here. Between them, on the table, lay the book. Verdana's book.

'I think you need to ask yourself some rather hard questions, Commander,' said the Doctor.

'Such as?'

'Such as, do you really hope to stop this new invasion with a handful of fancy vehicles and colourful weapons?'

Bishop smiled. A tolerant smile. 'What do you suggest?'

'I think the best weapons we have are our collective noddles.'

'What does that mean?' asked Bishop.

'Try and understand *why*. What do they want?' The Doctor's eyes pierced him. 'I have a feeling you already have some ideas about that.'

He was smart. Bishop gave him that. Maybe Alex was right: allowing the Doctor too much breathing room might be dangerous. ‘Doctor,’ he replied. ‘There’s no conspiracy here. We don’t have time.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘I agree, about the time that is.’

Bishop began to stand. ‘If that’s everything, I’ve got a hell of a lot to do.’

‘Wait,’ said the Doctor softly, and Bishop was damned if he didn’t find himself sitting back down again. ‘I haven’t finished.’

‘Look...’

The Doctor leant back, as if examining Bishop. He picked up a pencil and waggled it idly over the table. His clothes and bushy hair made him look like a clown trying to be clever. It was the eyes that got you, always the eyes. ‘Tell me, Commander,’ he asked. ‘How did you become the “Guardian of the Earth”? The head of this illustrious organisation?’

‘Is this relevant?’ Bishop snapped.

‘Oh I think so, yes.’

‘I was a lieutenant. Nineteen years old and on secondment from Westpoint to the Sharon Consortium. I was training to become a technological intelligence officer when the war promoted me to active duty. I helped oversee design of SEWARD, among other things.’

The Doctor nodded, as if chatting to pass time. Beneath his implacable exterior, Bishop was desperately trying to figure out what he was after.

‘Once the Myloki were dealt with PRISM was folded.’

‘Why?’

Bishop realised that most people on the planet would have had no idea of their own history. As to why everything seemed to implode. What was ingrained in him was unknown to others. ‘There was no money left to afford it. The war broke the bank. The UN economic system collapsed. We, PRISM, had taken too much.’ He scowled, aware that he was allowing long-buried feelings to rise to the surface. ‘We had to.’

'You just didn't trouble yourselves to tell anyone else. Probably to prevent panic, that kind of thing.' The Doctor's half-smile was fixed.

Bishop steamrolled him. 'The organisation was collapsed into a manageable state. A watchdog outfit, equipped to monitor and prepare for possible future incursions. No one expected *them* to come back, but no one wanted to take any more chances. We called it SILOET and went underground. Colonel LeBlanc retired after handing over the reins to me. I had been his 2IC for eighteen months. Two months after I took over, Colonel LeBlanc died. In his sleep.'

'Why underground?' asked the Doctor. Still, Bishop couldn't pin down this elliptical thinking.

'This book. Exposing PRISM to the world. Providing a reason for all the disasters they'd all had to endure. Blowing the lid and bringing everything down. It's a wonder we weren't all lynched.'

The Doctor changed tack again. 'And in the midst of all this chaos: Captain Grant Matthews. The man you threw to the lions.'

'That's not true.' Bishop stifled familiar anger. This line of questioning was uncalled for.

'A sacrificial lamb to save your precious organisation. Someone for the public to hate and take their eyes off SILOET. The book had started something you couldn't control so you exploited it. Used *him*. The alien in humanity's midst. It's disgraceful.'

Bishop slammed his fist on to the table. The Doctor had succeeded; he'd broken his self-control. 'Matthews was my friend!'

Guilt cut into him. Converting that into cold anger, he stuck a finger out at the Doctor. 'I found him, up there in that pit. When no one else wanted to look. When no one else believed. I dragged him out of that radioactive hole and brought him home. And yes, Doctor, yes I used him because I had to and there was no other way.' He stood up, definitely this time.

'It still hurts, doesn't it?' said the Doctor.

‘Damn you,’ came Bishop’s sardonic reply. He had a whole bunch of work to do. ‘If you’ve finished...’

‘We must find him. He’s the only man who can save this planet.’

Bishop fought the urge to walk out. He just couldn’t go, not yet. ‘He can’t help us,’ he snapped at the Doctor. ‘He disappeared thirty years ago. He could be anywhere.’

‘We need him,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’ll find him. I think I know someone who knows where he is.’

‘Who?’ Bishop wanted to hear this. He really wanted to hear this. ‘For Christ’s sake, who is left?’

The Doctor picked up the book from the table and turned it round. On the rear cover, Bishop saw the familiar portrait. Brown face, weary, determined. ‘A man who hated him enough to write this.’

Now Bishop really was walking. He didn’t have time for fairy tales. So this was the big plan. ‘How can Matthews help anyway? He didn’t get rid of them last time, did he? Even an atomic bomb right down their throats didn’t stop them. Not for long.’

The Doctor stood up. He tucked the book under his arm. ‘On the contrary. I think he did them a great deal of harm. And now they’re back to try and repair that harm.’

Commander Bishop rode the last of the transports up to SKYHOME.

He took a final look at the Television Centre as they rose. The shrill whistle of shells pierced the cold night air. God knows where the City had found tanks.

There were still lights on in the fake studios: a gamble that wasn’t fooling anyone. The City troops were everywhere, blasting away at the abandoned headquarters.

Bain had wanted to booby-trap the place. Bishop’s wiser head had seen reason. Maybe he’d been listening to the Doctor too much. Let them have the place. What difference did it make?

Macrimmon had been shipped out three days earlier. Out of harm’s way, and insurance. The Doctor yesterday, off with

Alex to climates new. Zoe sat opposite him now in this chopper.

Amazing how quickly this odd trio had become integrated. Despite all justifiable suspicions, they were just so damn useful. And you never knew, maybe the Doctor might even just find... him.

The land and the sky had become interchangeable in the night as the Transporter gained height. Only the lights in the Centre remained, punctuated by brief flares from the shells. Bishop thought he caught a last glimpse of tanks rolling over the ruins. Then the lights went out.

The headquarters was gone. Did he have any regrets? He looked across at the timid Zoe, dwarfed by the helmet on her head. She realised he was looking at her and scowled.

No, he thought. No regrets. Let's do this.

PART FIVE

Extract from *Message is Clear* by Neville Verdana

I never knew Grant Matthews.

I *knew* him, of course. I even taught him once - he was attending the lieutenant's course in Telecommunication Systems. Nice man. Polite. And I couldn't miss his extraordinary good looks, no one could. However, as to what was going on inside, I never had a clue.

In terms of officer material he never stood out for me, even when he made captain and became one of only thirty members of PRISM ever to gain that rank.

Captain Matthews was a quiet man. Reticent. He seemed to find command a burden, preferring to be alone. The only person who ever seemed to get close was his best friend.

Of course I did know Captain Adam Nelson, we all did. He was the life and soul of any party and terrific company. It was odd that the two became such close friends.

With Captain Matthews I always had the impression that he wished he lived a quieter life - to take a wife and have children. He wasn't funny, nor in my opinion particularly intelligent or clever. I remember thinking it odd that someone so average could ever have made captain. Whether or not the fact that I never achieved that rank until after the war has anything to do with this opinion, it is not for me to say.

Of course, all this relates to the Captain Grant Matthews who existed before... well, before *they* got him.

After that he just scared me.

XIV

The uniform they had given her was surprisingly acceptable. A silver miniskirt, stylish boots and tight-fitting lycra top. Even the silly purple wig was more than wearable. Static control they said, but Zoe was sure that there was some other, long-forgotten reason. After all, how come the men didn't have to wear them?

Zoe felt good wearing the uniform, there was enough resemblance to the clothes of her own time to make her feel comfortable. And the work they gave her meant she felt she fitted in.

Each morning from 0630 to 2200 SKYHOME time, she was required to help restore and upgrade ancient software in the command centre of this tin tub suspended in the stratosphere.

SKYHOME was another ridiculous concept, like the wigs. A headquarters that floated in the air - the amount of energy needed just to remain stable could have powered a small country. The metal superstructure was rusted and pitted with dents, reminding Zoe of a battered Victorian pier in the sky. Too expensive to break up, too dangerous to leave to rot, Commander Bishop had described SKYHOME as SILOET's white elephant, stuck in low orbit, filling the atmosphere with the filth of its exhaust vents. The Doctor had made similar remarks.

Memories of the last time she had been on board only functioned to impair her work. Zoe had determined to keep such memories buried.

Her life was reproducing itself in fractals. Here she was again at the mercy of an enemy, and once again she had forced her way into becoming invaluable. Creating a method to deal with an unbearable situation.

She concentrated on the numbers. Working through the abstract blue blocks of virtual digits. Watching the blocks think their way through logic parameters to find their place in the SILOET computer data-frames.

There was order in numbers, patterns coalescing from chaos. No ambiguity, no emotion. Just the pure perfection of ice-cold mathematics. Like being back in the City with Marie. Simpler to concentrate on the numbers.

No, she decided one day, not simpler. She wouldn't allow herself relative concepts such as 'simpler' - it had to be the superlative or nothing at all. She concentrated on the numbers because that was the only way.

She understood that she mustn't allow herself to break like Jamie. To allow herself to give into the horror.

Sticking to the facts, Jamie was suffering severe cognitive dissonance. He had been forced into an impossible emotional situation that he was unable to reconcile. His hostility towards the Doctor was a reaction to decisions he had taken under conditions of extreme stress. He needed someone to blame, and the Doctor, whom Jamie had believed dead, was the most logical target. In order to live with himself, Jamie was going to have to find a way to trust the Doctor again. It was that for him, or...

Emotion was clouding her judgement. The sight of Jamie, with her own freshly gouged memories of Mark, nearly shattered her.

The numbers were her cure, made her see Jamie as another case of logical restructuring, just needing the correct software to recombine the pieces. Not irretrievable.

She had restricted zones in her head, she knew that. Places she dare not visit; resources she dare not tap. Hence, returning to that work she did best, and staying aware of the mathematical irony. SPACE WHEEL - TARDIS - CITY - SKYHOME. Like the analogue of an exponentially rising number sequence.

Technicians were working round the clock to repair the crumbling base. A good cadre, Zoe thought to herself, considering the resources and the primitive nature of the

technology. Despite its current decrepitude, this must have been an impressive place once.

She had seen the old hangar. When she first arrived. She had watched as the four CHERUB attack aircraft were lifted out on whining hydraulic pads from their dusty paddocks, noting the blue box hidden in the shadows.

As the only female in SILOET who seemed to do anything difficult, Zoe realised that she was regarded with a mixture of admiration and resentment by her peers - just like her old colleagues back on the Wheel and the workers in the shoe factory. Fractals again.

The other SILOET women brought up from the Centre seemed overwhelmed by the reoccupation of SKYHOME. It was clear that SILOET's equal opportunities policy extended to looks, parental political weight and good old-fashioned bribery. These girls were the daughters of the last of the rich and powerful. In a more forgiving time period they would have been actresses, models, trophy wives.

Zoe often considered testing just how far these pampered girls' stupidity might stretch. Could she quantify their ignorance? Something to think about during the back-breaking hours she was pulling.

There was Lieutenant Gabrielle, who seemed to have discovered a true talent for incompetence. She combined spite and deference in equal measure and could often be spotted glaring resentfully at Zoe through oversized purple eyelashes, before inadvertently knocking a set of tools off a console, or dislodging circuitry with a clumsy elbow. Each mistake would spark off a frenzied dive for the make-up bag, and frantic efforts to improve further her admittedly impressive facial qualities. It was as if she expected an immediate court martial and wanted to be ready to charm her way out of trouble.

Lieutenant Anouska was nicer, in a dim kind of way. She was docile, like a pampered cat, ready to obey any order without question, but without much efficiency or sense of urgency. What was it like to live inside that beautiful head?

Zoe often wondered. The world must just go by as a confusing blur, leading you by the nose. It was a shame the wig didn't neutralise static inside the brain.

Occasionally there was a sudden lurch as SKYHOME adjusted its gyroscope stabilisers. At these frightening moments, the whole room would abruptly drop and any loose equipment would tumble across the floor. It was then that Zoe was reminded that she was inside a tiny, half-a-million ton metal speck, trapped in a constantly shifting wind tunnel with several miles of emptiness beneath her feet. She felt the blood rush from her face as she clutched at the support straps screwed into all the equipment.

Commander Bishop appeared twice a day and together they worked on a practical systems run-through, or whatever archaic technical term they described it as. A slow and laborious process of activating the control units: life-support, engines, superstructure pressure, flight/combat systems, nothing difficult. Zoe had noted with pride that the repairs to the air-conditioning the Doctor had made meant the system was now one hundred per cent efficient.

Each time she and Bishop rebooted, the computer system remained online for longer periods. Zoe deduced that if they continued at their current rate, the whole base should be operational within four days. If nothing went wrong, or nobody collapsed from the insane hours they were working.

On day three, Bishop seemed a little more human. As Zoe shut down the computer link and the sound of the exhaust vents adjusted from a roar to a whine, he looked at her from his terminal.

'That's good, Zoe. Excellent work.' He never smiled, but his piercing blue eyes shone with admiration. Zoe could almost smell the jealousy, like perfume, from the girls watching her.

Bishop stood, smoothing down his one-piece uniform. Zoe realised she often forgot he was an enemy responsible for Mark's death and her own predicament. She admired his control over himself, far in advance of her own techniques. Remarkable.

At the hatch, he turned back and stared at her. Gabrielle and Anouska quailed under his utter indifference to them. 'You never take a look around, do you Zoe?' he asked. 'You're not even curious about the station repairs, are you? Repairs you are responsible for.'

Zoe swivelled to face her computer screen. 'I can see exactly what's happening here,' she replied, watching the constantly shifting columns of numbers. 'I don't need to go outside.'

'Outside?' he asked. 'You mean, outside the computer centre.'

Zoe bit her lip. She had been obvious. 'Of course,' she said, feeling uncomfortably warm. The girls watched with dumb dread.

'Zoe,' said Bishop. 'Are you sure you're feeling okay? Doctor Koslovski is worried about your working patterns'

'I'm doing my job aren't I?' she snapped. 'I'm in control. It's a shame others can't keep themselves busy enough to mind their own business.'

She ignored Bishop but was aware that he stood in the doorway, studying her. Gabrielle and Anouska were still and Zoe could imagine them holding in their collective breath.

At last, he walked out.

Zoe kept her eyes on the screen. She ignored the hostility.

That had almost been an admission. An admission that she had cut loose from the non-virtual world. She had come to think of mathematics, of the simulations and number crunching, as the real thing. A deep pool into which she could immerse herself. A world more real, one that made sense. Inside. The rest was outside and not logical and to be shunned. Letting that out to Bishop was a definite slip, and one that must not happen again.

Zoe went back to work.

Bishop dug out old pilots from somewhere. Women, flown up from the surface, yanked from hard and unrewarding retirements. These stringy old birds wore their hair piled high, smoked incessantly and swore like dry-dock technicians. They had leathery sun-tanned skin and callused

fingers. Zoe avoided them, disturbed by their reckless confidence.

Twice a day, SKYHOME shook with a test scramble. The shriek of the ageing jets as they launched from the decaying flight deck was unsettling, especially when Zoe knew exactly how precarious their continued existence up in the stratosphere was.

The base was rebuilding so fast Zoe had to keep remembering that they were only in the second week since SILOET had abandoned a surface command.

She tried to keep all extraneous distractions out of her mind. She had to shut out all external influences.

Of course, she was looking for Jamie.

Bishop had opened up on most things but not everything. He didn't want Zoe to find her friend. Well, she would see about that.

She knew where the Doctor was. Somewhere out in the Caribbean with Colonel Storm, looking for his author. Zoe had managed to hack into the communications log and had transcripts of all messages relayed to SKYHOME. So far nothing had been coming through but the regular check-ins. Apart from a single word of congratulations with a request to have a message passed on to her. Trust the Doctor to remember her birthday.

Zoe spent a lot of time running through the SILOET systems network. The guards were too stupid to notice what she was up to. In fact, even a fully trained comtech would have had trouble comprehending her careful unpicking.

Despite its apparent complexity, SILOET was in fact a surprisingly small organisation. Given what seemed to be a global and rapid decline of resources, Zoe was impressed at how Commander Bishop had managed to maintain an efficient and wide-ranging operation. Iron discipline, fierce loyalty and optimum use of available technology had kept them in the game.

Essentially SKYHOME was a spider at the centre of an intricate telecommunications web, its suborbit enabling an

instantaneous response to almost any strand that might get jostled.

SILOET kept its human resources numerically small and as informed and motivated as possible. They were supported quickly and well. There was a minimal contact with outside agencies, but the personnel were tapped into all the global communications systems that remained operational. Some of the satellite monitoring relays dated back to the twentieth century. Old NASA probes had been reconfigured to play a new role as deep-space sensors, coordinated originally by SEWARD and now re-tapped directly into the SILOET net. Bishop had a hundred years of space technology to play with, all abandoned as resources became too expensive for anyone but him.

None of which had been any good when the Myloki had returned. Now it was the job of this station to refit and reorganise. To come up with some way of defeating the aliens once again. The briefings to which Zoe was now invited were simple and brutal.

That wasn't her problem, she had tried to decide. She was a small cog in the machine and as such, her priorities were to herself and her friends. If she could just locate Jamie. Here on the inside.

Seventeen days passed and still she could not locate him. Her failure angered her but she refused to accept that he was not going to be found purely by computer detective work. She began to feel a deep sense of resentment towards the organisation she was now devoting so much time to.

Bishop gave her more work. She had the feeling he knew much of what was going on in her mind. That somehow they were still spying on her.

One afternoon, Bishop summoned her to the recently opened observation lounge.

As Zoe made her way she translated the coordinates clicking away on the wall-mounted message boards. SKYHOME was presently hovering seven miles over the Siberian tundra.

She smelled stale alcohol and tobacco. Bishop was sitting on a recently renovated sofa. Zoe wondered who had spent time doing that. The lounge's orange decor didn't help either. A *groovy* circle bar looked embarrassed stuck in the middle of the room. The Commander was smoking a cigar and staring out at the thick cloud swirling round the fuselage.

Zoe walked in through the pressure hatch. The walls seemed coated with thick carpet. Soundproofing, she thought as she felt the increased throb of the engines. This room was precarious, protected only by its toughened glass windows. She felt *outside*.

The clouds thinned a little and Zoe spotted blue sky. Daylight. She had forgotten what that looked like.

'You know, Zoe, when SKYHOME was first launched we had terrible trouble with vapour trails.' Bishop stood and beckoned her in towards the sofa. 'I believe it took the PRISM technicians three years to perfect the self-oxidising exhaust process.' He tipped whiskey from a bottle on the table in front of him into a crystal glass. He laughed, sardonically, once. A secret headquarters that gave itself away by the means of its very existence. A foolish idea really. SKYHOME. An unwieldy folly. I suppose it had its public relations uses. When you needed public relations. Still, now we're stuck with the thing we'd better make use of its advantages.' He walked to the window. Zoe noticed that despite his years, Bishop was lean and fit. 'We'll be moving across the Dawn Line soon. I'm told the view is spectacular.' He shook his head again. 'Although fitting the lounge with windows is... well, they must have provided air-sickness bags along with the ashtrays.'

'You wanted something?' Zoe asked, uninterested in his observations.

'Come on, Zoe,' he insisted. 'Come and look.' He looked her up and down, unused to seeing her outside the computer centre. 'Your clothes...' he said. 'I'm sorry. They weren't really designed for their practical applications.'

Zoe was curt with him. 'I think you'll find that in my own century, this uniform would be considered perfectly adequate. Even modest.'

He seemed genuinely surprised. 'If you say so. The wig suits you. You should try purple hair more often.'

'Are you trying to insult me, Commander Bishop?'

He took an unruffled puff on his cigar. 'I'm trying to make friends with you. Whiskey? Smoke?'

She sat down on the leather sofa. 'No, thank you.' She looked down at her mini-skirt and silver boots. 'I suppose this had its public relations uses as well.'

Bishop smiled. 'A joke?'

She screwed up her face, trying to think it through. 'No.'

He looked out at the dying day. He stared out for a long while. 'You know, I don't think either of us is much good at the soft stuff.'

'Soft stuff?'

'People...'

Zoe picked up the whiskey bottle, sniffed and wrinkled her nose. How could anyone drink that poison?

'Okay Zoe, here it is,' said Bishop. 'There's no one who can figure the computers as well as you. Half of this software is ancient junk and the other half so experimental that even those who wrote the code can hardly figure it out.'

'I thought I already was helping you, Commander. I don't recall any choice in the matter.'

'You've got to stop fighting us. I can't have you as an enemy.'

She kept concentrating on the bottle. 'I'm not fight-

He tutted, almost amused. 'Do you really think I don't know what you're doing? You think you've been hiding what you've been up to? You're a kid, Zoe. A clever kid but still a kid.'

'Oh, a kid...'

'You hate us, hate SILOET for what we've done. And I don't know whether you're gonna crack up like your friend or bury your head in the sand forever, and I don't have time to care. But I do need you working for us. And unless you agree to do that, I'm sending you back down there. Tonight. Down to the surface. I'll even send you back to the City if that's what you want. But what I can't have is thinking that any moment

you're going to get mad and screw up the computer grid. You understand me?'

Bishop took the bottle from her hand and poured himself another drink. Outside, the scudding clouds were darkening.

'You know what we're up against. We don't know who they are, what they want or why they have come. Their abilities seem limitless and they're totally invisible. A race of creatures capable of possessing and controlling human minds utterly. Capable of duplicating the human body itself, augmenting it to infinite levels of sophistication.'

Bishop looked out into the grey void. 'But first they must destroy.' He was almost talking to himself. He paused, then looked at Zoe over his whiskey and cigar. 'So, any help I can get, I'll take. Even a grief-stricken girl who won't be able to keep a lid on her emotions for much longer.' Silence, as neither moved. 'Do you see? Which will it be? Help me or leave?'

'Take me down,' said Zoe.

If Bishop reacted, he didn't show it. 'Very well.' His voice was a neutral monotone. 'I won't stop you. I promise.'

Zoe stood to go. She needed to find some different clothes. 'You won't make me change my mind,' she warned. She walked away.

Bishop nodded. That was that. He waved the hand holding the cigar and turned to her just she reached the hatch. 'Just one thing,' he said. 'An opinion, nothing more. Then you can go. I swear.'

The evening sun was beginning to spill red light into the observation lounge. Zoe fought an urge to keep going.

She could afford to be generous. She walked back to the glass. He was right, the sun was turning the clouds all colours of the spectrum and, without realising it, Zoe found the ethereal scenery beautiful. There was a sense of the temporary about the light. So much colour; a beauty enhanced by the fact one knew that it was doomed to end and the sky become night. For the briefest of time, SKYHOME was balanced between light and dark. True beauty.

‘What do you want?’ she asked.

Bishop sighed. For the first time Zoe sensed his age, the years that weighed heavily on him, the real Bishop that for decades he had held carefully in check. ‘Why can’t we detect them?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘They’re up there, out in space, heading this way. How did SEWARD not spot *anything*? There must be some clue, some... product... that we can detect. They can’t be totally invisible.’ His frustration was palpable.

How could anyone work that out? she thought. How could anyone understand the processes of anything so alien?

It was time to go. ‘If I come up with an answer, I’ll let you know.’

Outside, the clouds were diminishing, burnt away by the last of the sun’s heat. Down below, Zoe made out the curvature of the Earth, a carpet of snow lit by red evening light.

‘Good bye Zoe,’ said Bishop. He couldn’t look at her.

She nodded, feeling something like an itch in her mind. What had he said about SKYHOME ‘gives itself away by the very means of its existence...’ How could that be relevant?

‘Good bye,’ she said, almost absent from her own words. Something like... the only thing they knew about the Myloki was that they were moving here from somewhere else... the itch, there in her back brain, that was the answer... the way... something about just being here...

‘Zoe?’ he asked.

The itch was so maddening she literally scratched her head through the wig. How to shake out the idea? ‘I need a computer,’ she said.

‘Right away,’ whispered Bishop.

The new Control Centre was filled with the monitors, detection equipment and data interpretation systems. They nearly all worked. There was a link to Lunar Base and half a dozen satellites on a perpetual loop around the solar system.

Zoe didn't know how many of them were functional. But the technicians did.

'What are we looking for?' whispered a bemused Lieutenant Anouska.

Zoe was vaguely aware of Bishop waving at Anouska to shut up. Zoe's eyes wandered across the scanners, the radar screens, the multi-coloured lights. Something, some tip in the right direction that would be enough.

'Get Captain Adams on the lunar link,' Bishop ordered, somewhere far away in the real world. 'Get him now.'

Zoe tried to imagine the Myloki, the actual physical substance of their being. She visualised the streaks of fire that blasted the Earth, where they might have been generated. Something in space, slowly approaching. Something big, capable of generating immense energy. Without detection?

Not possible, there had to be some form of entry into this... this, the human, plane of reality. Our universe with our laws and restrictions. Nothing could cheat that.

So, what else? If not here, where? That didn't matter. What mattered was how. Somehow... It had to come through.

Something... physical.

'Adams here, Commander!' the Captain's distant voice sounded tired. He had been pulled from his bed.

'Get your BLOCKADES ready for launch,' ordered Bishop. 'We may have detected them.'

An actual physical force... and a physical force, positive or negative, a presence or an absence, of that size, that magnitude, must be affected by...

She sat down at a terminal. The blue blocks of numbers sat in front of her. This was her language - the language of perfect truth. No ambiguity, no maybes. Think it through, it's there waiting for you.

'Radio telescopes collect and focus radio waves.' She looked around. The few that understood nodded. 'This varies according to which part of the electromagnetic spectrum they are designed to pick up.'

'Commander...' said Adams, disbelief evident in his tone.

‘Keep going,’ said Bishop.

‘I’m guessing that in all your previous encounters with the Myloki you were looking at one end of the spectrum, say the long wavelengths.’ She didn’t wait for confirmation. ‘You’re looking a long way out. But what if it isn’t?’

‘More,’ said Bishop.

‘The problem is mass. We’re assuming that whatever sent that flame had to have a great deal of mass. To produce such amounts of energy. A mass so great you don’t want it in the solar system as that kind of power will start shifting planets. It has to be a long way away. But what if it isn’t? What if the mass is close... and distant at the same time? Impossible, but what if it is? Not from out there, but alongside.’

Adams on the lunar link, playing the sceptic. That was good, that was what she needed. ‘Sir, this is wrong...’

‘It might be a... a hole, a fissure... a gate through which they enter, with the gigantic mass on the other side. There has to be a gate. The minimum to exist in any physical way in our universe, but there nonetheless. If it exists in our universe, no matter how small, it exists somewhere on the spectrum - it may not bend visible light, but with the right instruments the gate must be detectable, you just have to look in a different place. No matter how small it is, it can’t be totally undetectable. There’s mass.’

She couldn’t believe they looked confused. Elation spread like a drug through her body. How could they not know?

‘Ah, I’m not receiving that too well,’ said Captain Adams over the lunar link. Zoe sensed he was being diplomatic, but he was wrong. She was right.

‘I get it,’ said Bishop, in the background.

‘Sir?’ asked Adams.

‘It’s light; Bishop continued. ‘Even if... look, it has to bend the light, it has to. X-ray, ultraviolet, something. We’ve been looking too far away because where they are would seem impossible to us. Close. We’ve just got to find the distortion. Wait!’ he snapped, straight at Zoe. ‘What if they thought of that?’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Zoe. ‘I don’t think they understand... us... at all. Our physical laws might be the opposite of wherever it is they... inhabit. Their only flaw is the same as ours: a total inability to comprehend.’

‘Jesus...’ said Adams. ‘*That* alien...’

The numbers added up. Zoe hit a process key and watched her proposals crunch their way through the machine. ‘Commander,’ she said. ‘Transmit these coordinates up to the satellite sensors. They’re the best guess I have on the source point of the things they sent to Earth.’

Bishop was shaking. His blue eyes were gleaming. He believed her.

‘Commander?’ asked Lieutenant Anouska.

‘Do it,’ Bishop replied. ‘Captain Adams, prepare to realign all sensor equipment.’

SKYHOME had crossed the Date Line. The sky outside was dark, clear and shining cold. Stars glinted, and somewhere, their light would give away the position of something that had come for the Earth.

Zoe was back in the lounge, watching the shadowed planet move beneath them. The personnel had turned up in the lounge in their droves, waiting for the news. Television screens were trained on a night sky similar to the one outside the lounge, only blacker, much blacker. Even the old pilots, hair piled high, were pacing the carpets, drinking, smoking and waiting for something to happen.

Voices arrived filtered through the mounted televisions. The technicians, here and on Lunar, scrutinised the data. It had taken two hours to get everything in position. Even the creaky radio telescopes of Woomera had been roped in to action.

Spectral voices from all parts of the human world reported in.

‘Beagle 8 online, SKYHOME. We have triangulation... 3, 2, 1... confirmed...’

‘M.I.C., Lunar 1. Anything?’

‘That’s a negative, SKYHOME. We’re running a four-minute-delay damper through the Mars channel.’

Zoe spotted Anouska and Gabrielle looking at her like she was the alien. They wouldn’t know the whole story, but they all were aware that somehow the little girl in the purple wig had upset the whole game.

‘We have a ninety-million-mile sweep pattern engaging, SKYHOME. This is going to take time.’

It’s closer than that, Zoe thought. She knew it.

‘Negative, Lunar 1,’ came Bishop’s distorted voice. ‘You don’t need it that wide. Halve the sweep.’

A crackle of orders and some seriously doubting replies. It didn’t matter. They would find it, whatever it was. They had to. For the first time, Zoe wondered what would happen, what *they* would do, when they realised they were detected.

‘First data coming through now, SKYHOME,’ came a voice, some minutes later.

‘M.I.C. that Lunar 1. We see a clean sweep here. Well done. Looking good.’

But they haven’t found anything, not yet. The first seeds of doubt entered Zoe’s mind. What if they *were* that powerful? What if they could even cover that?

Then they had won. For nothing could defeat them. And logic dictated that if they were that powerful, they would have taken the planet decades ago.

‘Nothing yet, Lunar 1. Continue sweep.’

‘M.I.C. tha- what?’ a babble of voices in the background on Lunar Base. Lieutenant Gabrielle stood up. Zoe saw the tracks of tears on her face.

‘Didn’t catch that Lunar 1,’ came the reassuring voice of the SKYHOME com technician. ‘Say again. Have you detected - ?’

‘Err, negative, negative, SKYHOME. It has to be a malfunction.’ Captain Adams, trying to stay calm. The voice dropped away from the microphone. ‘Check that.’ A pause. ‘Then check it again! It can’t...’

Bishop’s voice. ‘Lunar 1, repeat your message. Repeat!’

They've found it, Zoe knew. That was no malfunction. But there's something odd.

Adams voice returned, flustered, worried. 'Err, M.I.C. on that SKYHOME. We are reviewing telemetric information and will advise, just as soon as...' more background voices. The lounge was silent, its occupants locked solid. Adams' tone was rising. He was frightened. 'That can't be right. How big?'

'Lunar 1! Lunar 1!' the com tech was yelling. 'Transmit your information. Transmit!'

Bishop's worried about being monitored, she thought. All of a sudden, she had a premonition that they were too late.

'It's... large,' said Adams, trying to normalise his voice. 'Growing. And it's close. Right outside the door. Close orbit... say, half a million miles...' A sudden noise, something outside, something different. 'Jesus Christ!' Adams's voice wavered, 'I can see it.'

'Look!' yelled Lieutenant Gabrielle. The whole lounge jumped 'In the sky. Up there.' The shouting voices came like bedlam from the television speakers. All control had been lost. Gabrielle was pointing out of the SKYHOME window.

Zoe followed the others to the glass. The reflections of the SILOET crew shuffled forward like diffused luminous ghosts. Pale faces, staring back in from the dark. She found herself curiously unmoved, as if she had been expecting this.

Across the whole vista of space, from one horizon to the other, the night sky was blurring. The crescent moon dissolved as if plunged into water. Pale lines, like thin glittering sticks, were growing over the sky.

'They were here all the time,' Zoe whispered. She tried to think mathematically, about dimensions, about infinity. 'They were just next door.'

Extract from *Message is clear* by Neville Verdana

So, what is the legacy of the Indestructible Man?

For my part, I'm going back to Barbados, eventually to die. All around me, the world seems to sicken. We may have won the war, but as the cliché runs, it appears we are going to blow the peace. I hope that my little island, with its rock and sea and stars in the sky will be forgotten and consequently last a little longer than most. Long enough for me.

I wonder if I have helped by writing this book. Will it cause the stir I intended it to? More likely it will be destroyed, certainly if PRISM can get their hands on it before going into print. What about the Myloki? Have they really gone forever? The answer, of course, is that nobody knows. Nobody ever knows, not for sure.

Now you know about Him, as much as I know. A man, destroyed and reborn, who turned on his creators. My final words in this book will be about the Indestructible Man. It was because of him that I made the decision to resign my commission and write. A decision made for one simple reason: I was frightened.

A year after the war ended, I was captain of the expedition that went up to see what we could find in that crater.

I regret my actions, I surely do. Down below, far beneath the aerial Shangri-La of SKYHOME, the world was rioting and starving and fighting, and all I could do was return something that should never have come back.

There was something left all right. In that lunar graveyard. A blasted and blackened shape charred and pulverised beyond recognition. A shape that crawled.

I took one look at it in the medical bay and knew I had to leave. That or go mad.

I brought Captain Grant Matthews back. Sometimes I wonder what else is up there.

I lie again on my rock and stare up at the sky. It's a different rock from the childhood one but then everything changes, doesn't it? Except him.

I think of all those schoolboy facts and figures they bamboozle you with: four billion years before the sun swells out and

consumes the Earth. The stupid timescale of the universe itself - that blind and idiot creation - with its swelling and shrinking like the wheezing of the biggest bellows you've ever imagined. The end of Time itself. Because, I don't think he can ever die. Not ever.

And I wonder what he is doing now? Where he is and what he is thinking? Right now as the sands of my own little clock drop grain by grain down the glass.

Does he know? Can he comprehend that which we mortals cannot? Can he look infinity in the face? Well, he had better. He had better learn to live with it, because you know what? I think he's stuck with it.

I don't see anything heartening up there now. Not in that vast black tapestry of space. I don't even have the comfort of believing there's nothing - for I know better and dread. I see evil. Infinity, that cold and chuckling devil, laughing back. That single word he sniggers and says over and over in that unvarying tone. Forever, forever, forever.

XV

The sand was unbroken, a bleached white. In the distance, a fresh dawn light illuminated the crumbling rocks of an old British fort. He couldn't resist a smile. One day he must come back and revisit the fort in its prime. Creaky ships, pirates and pieces of eight. Oh yes. And yellow fever, brutal murder and slaves.

The Doctor strolled along the marbled beach. Ahead of him, an emperor crab struggled towards the surf line, panicked by wheeling, shrieking gulls, aware that it had exposed itself.

He jogged towards the creature, hurling his elastic-sided shoes away. A gull swooped and the Doctor yelled, scaring it. Hurling abuse at him, the bird looped away towards the rising sun. It would be back, it squawked defiantly. The Doctor canopied himself over the crab, shielding the little creature from any more attacks. He picked it up, wincing as the crab nipped his hands. He placed it in the transparent water and brushed sand over its ragged shell. The crab clacked its black-fingernail claws, warning him off.

Sucking his wounded fingers, the Doctor said aloud, 'What sort of gratitude is that?' Suddenly, he felt lonely.

Already, the sea was as warm as a bath. He waded in further, enjoying the space and the sensation. Until he realised he hadn't rolled up his check trousers. Fascinated, he watched the damp soak its way up the cloth.

An odour - something against the smell of the beach. He sniffed the clear air. 'That's breakfast,' he informed no one in particular.

He followed the smell of grilling flying fish back to the village. The Doctor licked his lips. He really liked the way the villagers peppered the fish before wrapping it up in banana leaves. Delicious. He must get the recipe. Mrs Craig waved at

him as he stumbled up the cliff path. ‘Doctor! Good morning!’ Her voice was snatched away by the breeze.

You see, he thought, this is the life. Barbados was certainly a refreshing change from the confines of that broken London. There was danger here, yes, but there was everywhere. Danger was easy. Right now, the moment was just fine.

He thought about the crab he had saved and then the silvery bodies that lay sizzling over the metal slats. Who decided, he wondered? Who decided which ones would survive and which would be taken?

It wasn’t the kind of decision anyone had the right to judge. No sense in moralising over it. You did what you could for those you could. Nothing more. Any other thought on the subject was a waste of time.

‘And how are you this morning, Doctor Rip Van Winkle?’ asked Mrs Craig as she folded the leaves over the sizzling fish. Her smiling bulk, piled even higher by the swirls of an impossible green scarf wound round her head, cast a shadow over the makeshift barbecue. The flying fish were lined up on a grid set across a customised fuel oil drum. Did that add to the flavour?

‘Oh, passable,’ he replied. ‘Distinctly passable. Thank you for asking.’

She handed him his portion. ‘You’re a strange man, Mr Doctor. Very young and very old. Which one today?’

He inhaled the charred aroma with obvious pleasure. ‘Definitely young, my dear.’

The village was probably much as it had been for the last two hundred years. Despite the rusting automobiles and roofs built from old advertising hoardings, the Doctor reflected that it would be difficult to infer the time period into which he had strayed. Naked children followed him around as he took the air, wondering what it was he found so fascinating about their ropy old dwellings.

Peace, he thought. If only he could have brought Jamie here.

Colonel Storm had told him to be wary of the government police. They passed by occasionally, but Mrs Craig (a widow as it turned out) said he shouldn't worry. They rarely bothered with the village. There was nothing left to rob. The political signs proclaiming long life to whatever tin-pot dictator was currently stripping the island had been defaced with humorous daubings. Even defiance was performed with gentle humour here.

This was a good place. There weren't many in the universe, but here, yes. He would like to have stayed but he had a job to do. As ever.

Of course, Colonel Storm had wanted to come in with the troops, occupy the place or something. The Doctor had pointed out that there seemed very little point and that being nice was as good a tactic as any.

He stretched out in a hammock and waited for the SILOET man to come back. Mrs Craig had given him a straw boater with a half-chewed brim. She informed him that the goat had been at it, but it was perfectly sufficient to shield his face from the sun. He knew then that he was going to enjoy his morning.

Storm arrived just before noon. The Doctor smelt rain and saw a few ominous thunderheads crowning the overhead mountains. The sound of birds chattering grew in volume. It certainly was hot.

He hoped Jamie was safe and that Zoe was keeping out of trouble. He had the urge to talk to someone.

'Doctor!' came Storm's voice, right by his ear. The Doctor jumped, tipped out of his reverie and his hammock. 'Wake you up?'

'Never,' snapped the Doctor. Haughtily and with great dignity, he dusted himself off.

Storm was perspiring under his tropical cap. His face was a disturbing red. So much smoking and drinking, it was a wonder any of these SILOET people were still alive.

'He's not here,' said Storm. 'At least, not round this neck of the woods. That or he's dead.'

‘Really...’ replied the Doctor.

‘I’ve been all over. In every direction. Nothing. No sign.’

The Doctor fanned himself with his hat. ‘Perhaps you haven’t been asking the right people.’

‘I want to call in back-up,’ said Storm. ‘I can have a search squad here in two hours.’

Storm lit up yet another cigar. The Doctor sighed. ‘Would they never learn? ‘Don’t you think these people have had enough of tin hats and guns? Perhaps if you’d all spent a bit less time playing soldiers, you wouldn’t need me.’

‘Need?’ Storm stared at him. The Doctor gave nothing away.

They listened to the buzz of the flies.

‘I still don’t see why you think he would tell us, even if we could find him.’ Storm looked tired. He looked old.

‘Oh, I thought I’d made myself perfectly clear.’

‘Not to me.’

The Doctor began to trace a pattern in the street dust. ‘You’ve read the book and you still don’t see?’

‘Yes, I’ve read the book. It’s thirty years old, meaningless.’

‘Really?’ said the Doctor. ‘I thought the clues were rather obvious.’

‘I don’t get you.’

‘Colonel,’ he continued. ‘This is a man who hated Captain Matthews. Hated with a vengeance.’

‘But he said he wanted to forget. Come here and get away from it all. Die in peace.’

The Doctor held up a finger. ‘Ah, subtext, subtext! You must read more, Colonel. Have you never heard of the unreliable narrator? That’s what he *wanted*. Now as you well know, we don’t always get what we want, do we? I think that his feelings concerning Matthews are strong. So strong that despite himself, he would want to know. He would want to... compete.’

‘Compete? In what way?’ Storm was genuinely puzzled.

‘Matthews will live forever, so he says. Now, how do you think our man would compete with that?’

Leaving Storm to scratch his head, the Doctor walked over to the hut in which he had slept the last two nights. 'Mrs Craig?' he asked gently.

She was out the other side, in what she called her garden - a concrete yard perched on the edge of the cliff. Blooms of sumptuous bougainvillea grew through cracks in the concrete.

Mrs Craig was sat in a battered deck chair, making something out of what looked like straw, feathers and wire. She was singing to herself. Stretched away in front of her was the awesome vista of the Caribbean. No ships sailed and no aeroplanes cut up the sky. Even their own seaplane, requisitioned from far away Port au Prince, was hidden, tucked away in a little cove right beneath them.

'Yes, Doctor dear?' she asked. Her seamed, weather-beaten face seemed ancient, although she had probably looked like this for a hundred years, and would last another hundred. She smiled and the sun shone.

'I'm sorry, but I have to ask you...'

'You come looking for that radio fellow?' she asked, almost absently.

'Radio?'

'Old military man? A very unhappy man?'

'Well... er...'

Mrs Craig looked at him slyly. 'The fellow your friend's been scouting half the island for?'

'Yes, I expect that's the one.'

'Why didn't he just ask me?'

The Doctor laughed. 'He probably thought you wouldn't tell him.'

Mrs Craig wrinkled her nose. 'He's probably right.' She stared out to sea. 'Doctor, I like you but you know, I think you're the kinda feller who attracts trouble. With a big "T". You're gonna bring trouble here if you stay around much more. And I'm too old for trouble.'

She creaked round to face him. 'So. I'll tell you where he is. But he won't like it. He won't like you. He's all eaten up. Seen

too much of the world for one man. Me, I like my village. Never had the urge to travel. Where is there to go?’

‘I wish I could share your sentiments,’ the Doctor replied. ‘I really do.’

Mrs Craig held up the object she had been making. It was a cross, a crucifix decorated with feathers. ‘I was gonna give you this,’ she said. ‘For good luck.’

‘Oh, really?’

‘But I’m not gonna give you it now.’ The wrinkles on her face thickened. ‘It ain’t your thing. It ain’t for you.’ She was smiling, but her eyes were sad.

‘Well,’ he said. ‘It was a nice thought.’

‘Besides,’ she continued. ‘It wouldn’t do you no good.’ She hurled the cross out over the cliff. Together they watched it sail out, somersault in the wind, then plummet into the sea.

High up in the foothills, in the shadow of the grey peaked mountains, the jungle was sodden and misty. Thick clouds had deposited several hundred litres of rain on to them before racing on to soak something else. The heat had then come back, and with that the mosquitoes - who now sang and whined round them.

The Doctor led the way up the pitted road, its surface churned by tyre tracks. A battered tin sign staked into the ground pointed the way to ‘Piper’s Clinic’.

Colonel Storm was behind him, calling in to SKYHOME. The Doctor stopped and waited for the soldier to finish. He looked like he needed a rest. He wondered whether he ought to check his companion into this clinic for treatment.

‘All done?’ he asked brightly, as Storm hewed his way up the steep muddy slope.

‘We should have brought the ATVs,’ Storm snarled. ‘Could have got up this dirt track in the half the time.’

‘You can’t always rely on your toys. The walk will do you good.’

Storm slapped his neck. ‘If I don’t catch malaria first.’

‘Don’t be a baby. Besides, I think we’re there.’

‘There’s news,’ said Storm suddenly. The Doctor detected a grim tone in his voice. ‘Something’s happened. It seems our guests have arrived.’

‘Who?’

‘Them. The Myloki.’ Storm stared at him. ‘SKYHOME has started some kind of tracking project. Your friend Zoe... they’ve detected them.’

The Doctor looked past the gate to this ‘Piper’s Clinic’. ‘Then we had better hurry.’

The path was overgrown with fleshy palms, the ground knotted with thick roots. Birds scuttled through the vivid green trees, screaming out their warning cries. The cloud was covering the sun once again. The air was oppressive and hot; signs that a larger storm was about to hit.

After about half a mile of barely passable path, the Doctor pushed through a thick fern to reveal what he would only describe as a glade. He was looking at a rectangle of neatly mown grass, about a quarter of a mile wide. A large bungalow, replete with screens and porches, nestled in the centre, circled by a little path of paving stones. A rather more salubrious sign than the one on the road told him they were finally at the long- promised Piper’s Clinic.

The Doctor heard a click behind him. He turned to see Storm slipping a magazine into a machine pistol. He shook his head. ‘I don’t think we’ll be needing that, Colonel. What good will it possibly do?’

Storm looked at him, eyes small and deadly in that sunburnt, pockmarked face. ‘I haven’t survived this long by being careless. This time we play it my way, Doctor.’

‘I see,’ the Doctor replied. ‘You still don’t trust me.’

‘I don’t trust anybody.’

The Doctor smiled. ‘Spoken like a true television detective. Shall we go in?’

He fanned himself with his straw hat as he strolled across the lawn. He felt the throb of generators underground. Vents were discreetly tucked away in the paved path. Technology. Despite that, the bungalow was stucco and white paint in the

traditional manner. Wooden slats over the windows stared blankly as they approached.

‘Good afternoon!’ yelled the Doctor.

Storm was eyeing everything, including the encroaching jungle, on the lookout for whatever it was he was looking out for.

As they reached the veranda, a wooden door swung open and a heavy-set, white-suited man stepped out. His skin was a deep black and he looked at them with intelligent brown eyes shadowed under a white panama hat. A neat beard sat on his double chin, like it was glued in place. He must have been sixty years old. ‘Good afternoon,’ he said. ‘Are you lost?’

The Doctor stepped up on to the wooden floorboards and, before the other could react, grabbed his hand and shook it warmly, like they were old friends. ‘Doctor Piper, I presume?’

The man was clearly taken aback, probably by the sight of Storm’s machine pistol. ‘That’s right. Can I help you gentlemen?’ he asked. He seemed doubtful, not unexpected given the circumstances.

‘Oh, I hope so,’ said the Doctor. ‘We’re looking for a man. We think he might be here.’

‘Are you from the government?’ asked Piper.

The Doctor tapped his nose. ‘Oh no,’ he said. ‘We’re from Mrs Craig.’

Doctor Piper looked at him as if he’d just grown another head. Then abruptly he laughed. ‘You’re covered in mud. Come in. Let me get you something to drink.’ He turned to lead them inside.

‘Is he here?’ asked Storm, still on the lawn.

‘Oh yes,’ came Piper’s reply. ‘He’s here.’

The air conditioning was first rate. So much so that the Doctor found himself shivering. ‘Are you planning to shoot him?’ came Piper’s voice from one of the many rooms. ‘I just wondered about the gun.’

The Doctor looked at Storm. ‘I think you can put that away,’ he said.

Storm nodded, apparently reassured by their surroundings. The clinic was more like some colonial golf club than anything particularly medical. It was all rugs, padded leather armchairs and trophies on the wall. Dark, cool and quiet.

The Doctor heard clattering from somewhere. 'Doctor Piper?'

Glasses clinked. 'I make my own lemonade. But God takes care of the fruit juice.' Piper reappeared, following up his statement with a tray full of liquids. 'Please, sit down.'

After the pleasantries and the drinks, Doctor Piper sat back in one of the armchairs and waited patiently for their questions.

'You don't seem particularly surprised to see us, Doctor Piper,' said Storm. He never lost that wariness, the Doctor noted.

'Well,' their host replied, 'if you were the government, what could I do to stop you? I must expect it at some time. Some day this will end, it is inevitable.' He smiled, a kind of smile the Doctor had last seen on a Tibetan monk. Doctor Piper was perfectly at ease with himself. 'If you are not from the government, then what have I to worry about?'

'A very sensible answer,' said the Doctor. 'Now, let's talk about Neville Verdana.'

'Very well. What would you like to know?'

'You said he was here.' Storm's impatience was palpable. 'Where?'

Doctor Piper was unruffled. 'He has a room here. In fact, it is his room. He paid for the building of this whole clinic.'

'How many patients do you have?' asked the Doctor.

'Just one. Just him.'

'What sort of clinic is that?' asked Storm.

'The sort that looks after one patient. Strictly speaking, you might call it a hospice.'

The Doctor had a dark feeling. That word had connotations. 'You mean...'

Doctor Piper nodded. 'Yes. What he has can never be cured. Just... controlled. For a while.'

The trio sat and looked at each other. The air conditioning pumped away in the background. 'And you?' asked Storm.

Piper smiled. 'Yes. And me.'

And the Doctor saw the shadows under the man's eyes, the hollowness of his cheeks disguised by the beard and roll of flesh. What could he say? Nothing, nothing that wouldn't sound like false pity. The man had found peace, he didn't need anything else.

'Alas,' said Piper, 'he does not find this clinic as tranquil as I. I can only try to comfort him.'

'Can we see him? Now?' asked Storm. Despite his customary bluntness, his voice was muted.

'I don't see why not,' came the reply. 'I'll go and ask him.'

With a massive effort, Doctor Piper pushed himself out of the chair. 'Just wait here a moment.'

Thick mosquito webbing shrouded the man in the bed. Sophisticated boxes extended wires and tubes into the darkness. LEDs glowed, and machine pulses ticked the time away in regular green lines.

The temperature was even lower in here and the air smelt of antiseptic. The Doctor's breath was a cloud in front of his face. Their footsteps creaked on the floorboards. A single shaft of sun arrowed in from the skylight overhead. A line of dusty light that stretched from ceiling to floor, like a laser beam.

'I'll leave you to it,' whispered Doctor Piper, who shuffled away.

The man in the bed did not move. Colonel Storm took a decisive step forward. Suddenly irritated, the Doctor waved him back. 'If you'll allow me...' he said. Storm stopped, and moved back to the doorway.

The Doctor closed in on the bed. Through the netting he made out the shape of the man. Neville Verdana.

He was very still as he lay there. The machines made their noises.

'Mr Verdana?' whispered the Doctor.

He saw movement. A head moved. A thin and bony head, as if only a skull rested on the pillow. The Doctor made to move the mosquito nets.

The shrivelled creature in the bed shivered. The Doctor pulled his hand back.

‘Who are you?’ it said.

‘I am the Doctor.’

He heard a coughing noise, and to his surprise he realised it was the sound of chuckling. ‘You’re a bit late,’ said the voice. ‘Have you come to cure me?’

Perhaps he *was* too late, the Doctor wondered. If the mind had gone as far as the body...

He felt sweat on his brow.

‘Lieutenant,’ he said. ‘I need to talk to you.’

‘Lieutenant?’ asked Verdana.

‘About him. The Indestructible Man. Captain Grant Matthews.’

A long silence. The machines kept their electronic vigil. The Doctor hoped he hadn’t shocked him too much.

‘Mr Verdana?’

Bony lips smacked together. ‘You’ve come to torment me. Go away.’

The Doctor lowered himself gently on to the end of the bed. He looked back at Storm, dark in the gloom. ‘You have to tell me, Lieutenant. You’re the only person who can. And perhaps by telling me, you might -’ he broke off, not knowing what to say.

‘What? Get better?’ Again that dry chuckle.

‘You know where he might be found. The Myloki are returning. They’re returning tonight, I think. And you can help us stop them.’

Silence. The head quivered slightly, as if the skull was thinking, taking in the news.

‘Neville?’ came Storm’s voice.

‘Who’s that? Who’s there?’

‘It’s me, Neville. Alex. Alex Storm.’

Verdana, what he had become, sunk back into the bed. The fleshless head twisted. ‘Storm. The bottom feeder. Killed

anyone lately, Alex? Don't tell me they put you in charge?' He rolled over. 'Go away. I don't know where he is.'

Alex was too close, and the Doctor sensed an intensity about him. Here was a man who really would do anything, even to this pathetic heap. He placed a hand on the colonel's arm.

'I understand...' he began.

'You don't understand a thing,' Verdana hissed, and the Doctor could feel the heat of the sick man's hate. He uttered a slow moan of anguish. 'Goddamn sounds. Always the noise. You should be thanking me, raising me up. You owe me it.'

'What sounds?' asked the Doctor, as gently as he could manage.

'Them. Their noise. Always. All that time, doing my duty, decoding their voices. I listened too long. You know, I think it was the voices that made me sick. Isn't that funny? Isn't that a fine irony? The Myloki give me the sickness, and give him...'

'What?' asked the Doctor. 'What did they give him?'

The head sunk back again. Outside the stifling heat of the room, the sun was preparing for evening. It was late. The shaft of light was thinning, deepening the shadows around the room. The Doctor realised he wanted to get out of here. The antiseptic smelt of death.

'You know,' said Verdana.

The Doctor looked up at Storm. 'Neville,' said the soldier. 'You have to tell us.'

There was no reaction from the man in the bed. Just the harsh rattle of his breathing. Whatever the illness was it was all over him. Reducing him to nothing. The Doctor realised Verdana must only be about fifty years old. Living like this, wouldn't death seem a sweet release?

'Very well, Lieutenant,' he said. 'I won't press you.' He stood. 'Colonel, I think we should leave.'

Storm was glaring down at Verdana. He was clearly affected by the sight in front of him.

'Colonel?' asked the Doctor.

'We'll be back,' said Storm.

The rain came down heavily that night. The tidy lawn groaned beneath rain as hard as bullets. Inside the one-man clinic, the Doctor heard the tropical storm lash the building with a calm, noisy intensity. Thunder boomed, right outside. The noise was tumultuous. It sounded like the end of the world.

Doctor Piper's cigars were excellent, so Storm informed him. Cuban, hand-rolled over twenty years ago, and perfectly maintained in a top-of-the-range humidior. Together, Storm and Piper filled the room with blue smoke.

An old grandfather clock, its wooden body stretched and warped by the climate, knocked away the minutes. The time was X to III. Its yellowed face was blank and impenetrable.

At last, the thunder dwindled to distant rumbles. The rain thinned to a drizzle. The Doctor went outside to get some air into his lungs. When he returned, Storm was on his own.

'The good Doctor Piper has gone to bed.' The moonlight accentuated his pockmarked face. He still wore his SILOET tropical fatigues. He stared at the Doctor, who realised that for the first time that the blank Slavic face seemed ready for some conversation.

'Tell me, Colonel,' the Doctor asked. 'Why did the Lieutenant call you a bottom feeder? I take it he doesn't seriously believe you are a fish?'

Colonel Storm smiled. 'He never liked me. Didn't think a person like me should have been recruited into PRISM.'

'And what sort of person are you?'

The smile took on a sardonic quality. 'The criminal kind of person.'

'I see,' said the Doctor.

Storm stubbed out his cigar. 'Alexei Stomorov, killer. A very good one. Not mad, not inclined to bungle his work, and trustworthy. If it's interesting enough. If it pays enough.'

The Doctor began to understand. 'They pulled you out of a prison. How come you were caught?'

'I wasn't paid enough.'

The killer leant back, rubbing his slab-like face. 'Colonel LeBlanc heard of me and approached me one day with an offer. I was rotting in a Polish jail - not the most salubrious of establishments I am certain you understand. Said he would make me a captain and that there would be enough killing, even for me. He was right there. I took him up on his offer. And very soon, I learnt the difference between right and wrong.'

'Which is?'

'We are right. The Myloki are wrong. If we don't survive we die. That's the only deal that matters. And nothing else.' Storm was calm, but the Doctor could sense his strong, righteous anger. 'So I kill.'

'How many?' asked the Doctor. 'I should think it's important to know.'

Storm stood up. He looked tired, like he was carved from tough, old teak. 'It doesn't matter. I would kill the world to stop them.' He stood, gleaming with perspiration in the silvery light.

'You poor man,' said the Doctor. 'You must have... Where did you grow up? Originally?'

Storm snorted. The conversation was over. He pulled his pistol from its holster. 'I don't remember. Now, let's visit our friend one last time.'

* * *

'Wake up!' he bellowed. 'Verdana!'

The Doctor scrambled after Storm. 'Colonel! Wait!'

Storm ripped aside the mosquito nets. The Doctor saw him wince at the sight of the body in the bed, then raise his gun. The impassive face of the assassin was lit a ghastly green in the electronic light. 'Verdana! I've come to pay my last respects.'

The Doctor tried to grab the gun arm, but got thrown to the cold floor for his pains.

A light came on behind him. Doctor Piper was scrambling out of bed. There was a faint 'What is it? Who's shouting?' and a curse as he bumped into something.

‘Colonel Storm. You can’t kill him,’ said the Doctor. ‘He doesn’t know anything. Death’s all over him. Look.’

The Doctor looked.

There was a wizened child in the bed. Stick-thin, nut-brown limbs were splayed out, stitched with drips. Yellowing teeth grinned under a wispy, lipless mouth. A large domed head was creased with wrinkles and sores.

The Doctor’s first thought was how could such pain be endured? How could it live?

Storm lowered the gun to the figure’s skull. Verdana didn’t move.

‘Get away from him!’ screamed Doctor Piper, rushing in. Storm swivelled to fire, almost instinctively. Almost. Piper screamed and slipped over. He sat up, hands raised in a pathetic attempt to stave off a bullet.

The Doctor stepped in the way. ‘Wait!’ He glared at Storm.

Storm stared back, mouth set, finger poised to fire.

‘Colonel,’ the Doctor spoke quickly, ‘I won’t let you!’ He stamped his feet and folded his arms.

Finally, Storm turned to look at him. ‘You? You’re nothing.’

‘I’ve had enough killing,’ the Doctor continued. ‘And I’m not going to allow any more. Not tonight.’

A sound. A low, horrible sound from the bed. The creature’s chest was vibrating. Verdana was chuckling. Beady eyes stared up at them. ‘Kill me?’ it hissed. ‘Never.’

The Doctor seized the initiative. Ignoring the gun, he knelt heavily down by the bed. He looked right into those eyes. ‘You hate him. Why?’

Verdana chuckled once more, which dissolved into heartfelt coughs.

‘Why stay alive this long? Why endure so much? What did he do?’

The hands stirred feebly, trying to wave the Doctor away. He swatted them down. ‘No, Lieutenant. I must know, and you must tell me. You want to tell me. You have to.’

The Doctor felt Storm’s gun in his right ear. ‘Please,’ he whispered. ‘Take that thing away.’

He held Verdana's hand. It was as thin and brittle as a dried twig.

Suddenly, Verdana began to sob. The sound was horrendous, a squalling, wretched series of cries. The doll-face twisted and writhed. The Doctor could feel the pulse under the paper skin.

The eyes, Verdana's tiny eyes, closed. He seemed to will forth the energy to marshal his thoughts. 'Who was *he*?' he whispered, the burning hate all too clear. 'To get all that. Who was he to get everything?'

Storm lifted the gun from the Doctor's head.

Verdana seemed to be talking to himself. 'A jumped-up clerk... a chauffeur. A nothing. He got it all, and I got... It shouldn't have been this way.'

A bony hand clutched his sleeve. 'If they're coming back, they could take this filth out of my body. I could have a new body, you see? You see how they could save me? They could give me... the gift.'

The Doctor patted that claw. 'I really don't think it's a gift, Lieutenant.'

Verdana wasn't listening. He was locked in his maudlin past. 'I got shunted off... but he gets to spend eternity with his rich friends, oh yes. Nothing but the best for him. Well, I won't die before him. I won't! Find him on your own. I'll never help you. Let the Myloki come. Let them come.'

Summoning all his strength, Neville Verdana spat at the Doctor. 'It should have been me,' he snarled. 'It should have been me.'

XVI

The heat and the bright sun were back the next morning. The Doctor had risen early and was waiting for Storm to emerge from the clinic.

He sat on the veranda with Piper, staring up at the mountains. They were drinking camomile tea.

'This is not a bad place to die,' said Piper. 'I can think of worse.'

The Doctor thought about the creature inside. 'Do you really think it matters to him? How long do you think he has?'

Piper sipped his tea, as if they were discussing cricket. 'It is a miracle he is alive at all.'

'No miracle. A curse.'

'Don't worry. He will find peace, like me.'

The Doctor stood up. 'I would like to shake your hand, sir,' he stated.

Surprised, Doctor Piper put down his rattling cup and grasped his palm. 'Why, thank you Doctor. I barely know you, but I feel I have been praised highly.'

Storm exited the clinic, as expressionless as ever. The Doctor thought he detected a slight unease - a furtive undertone he'd not seen before. 'You haven't...' he started.

'He's fine,' Storm replied. 'Well, as fine as when we found him.' He looked around at the morning brightness, unhappy at the prospect of a long hot walk.

'Goodbye, Doctor. Goodbye, Colonel,' said Doctor Piper waved them off. 'Until we meet again!'

The Doctor took one last look at him, gave a grand wave, and turned away. 'You know Colonel, that is one of the bravest and most sensible men I have ever met.'

They soon reached the main road. Already the rain-soaked mountain highway was hardening under the fierce sun. 'You're sure you know?' asked the Doctor.

Storm nodded. 'It has to be. "Rich friends". That family was ruined by the war when PRISM commandeered all their technology. Helped us build SKYHOME and the weapons systems. Thing is, even though we were being invaded, the old Dad was against us. Refused to aid the construction of any form of offensive weaponry. Madness.'

The Doctor nodded. He wasn't going to be drawn into an argument. There wasn't enough time. Besides, he needed to think... think about him.

'When the book came out and everyone found out what Matthews was, he disappeared. He was hated, feared, despised. I think it was the fact that he was a duplicate, even though he had all the memories and emotions and personality of the original. He was the same man. But people couldn't get their heads round it. A few nutters even tried to kill him just to see if they could. I can't tell you how many assassination attempts he went through.'

Trudging downhill was easier than up. They made good time and even Storm didn't seem to be puffing as heavily as he was the day before. The trees had grown right over the road here and the shade was a godsend.

'You knew Captain Matthews,' said the Doctor. 'How did you find him?'

Storm shrugged. 'I don't know. He was... normal. An Englishman. Old school, very reserved, you never quite knew what he was thinking. Had these blue eyes. I didn't like him. He was... soft.'

They were about half a mile from the village now. The Doctor was thinking about lunch and about how much he had to do. How much time was there?

He had a thought. 'What was he like when he... came back? You know.'

'The same. Much the same anyway,' Storm corrected himself.

'So there was something different.'

Storm chuckled, without humour. 'If you like. He got, well I suppose you'd call it depressed. Oh, he could do his job. Even the jobs the Colonel gave him, which mostly seemed to consist of getting blown up, or shot, or gassed. He was always a loner, but after *they'd* got to him, he was a lot worse. I'd see him sometimes, on SKYHOME, in the quiet periods. He'd just be sitting on his own. It didn't help that the rest of the crew didn't like him. They were professional with him, but there was something... distant about Matthews. Something different. Perhaps it was just knowing what he had become.'

'Very interesting,' said the Doctor, unable to stop himself empathising with this, one would have to call it, *historical* figure.

'You know what I think?' said Storm. The Doctor was surprised at the personal tone in his voice.

'Enlighten me, please,' he asked.

'It's thirty years ago, but I still remember how he looked when I saw him sitting there in the SKYHOME lounge.' Storm looked at the Doctor. 'It was the same expression I had seen on some of the lifers in prison. The ones who weren't ever going to be released. I think he wanted to die.' Again, the cold laughter. 'Funny, isn't it? The man who wants to die can't, the one who wants to live can't either.' He started down the road again. 'Funny.'

The Doctor found himself thinking about Verdana. How could a man hate that much? To feel deprived of immortality, yes. Perhaps that would feel unfair. But hate? He was unable to conceive of that kind of magnitude, as alien to him as the Myloki.

'Poor man,' he said. 'Every second of every day, he must wish for the end.'

'Him?' Storm grunted. 'He'll never let go.' The Colonel thought for a moment, as if deciding whether to tell the Doctor or not. He did. 'I offered.'

The Doctor stopped, puzzled. 'Offered?'

Storm tapped his holster. 'Offered.' He looked back up the mountain. Piper's Clinic was utterly invisible, its natural

camouflage perfect. 'That one, he's never going to give up the ghost.'

There were shouts from ahead. The village.

The pair ran down the final stretch of the muddy track.

Among the tin and timber shacks, out in the dusty main street, the villagers were shielding their eyes and looking up at the bright blue sky. The Doctor ran through them, trying to adjust his eyes to the brightness. He smelt the wonderful cooking again.

'Doctor! Doctor!' Mrs Craig was shouting. 'Look at that! Oh my Lord.'

Finally, quelling the rising agitation in his hearts, the Doctor looked up. He put a hand over his eyes to block out the bright light.

Nothing. Just blue sky and a fierce sun. A few wisps of cloud, and some white... what? What was that?

'Looks like... like fish bones...' said Storm.

Straight lines were growing, white and flickering, across the sky, as if someone was tracing a grid in a fine white pen.

'It's them,' said Storm, and there was true fear in his voice, it's them, isn't it?

'Very likely,' the Doctor replied, aware of the facetiousness of his understatement.

XVII

He stared out through the plexi-glass window at the water. The days passed and the fog in his mind began to lift. He felt more... able.

The anger he kept. He was nurturing that. It was just that he was learning to get clever about it. Not make it obvious. Try and make it like he was coming round to their way of thinking.

According to his instincts he had been here eight days. There was no telling time in the prison, and the ocean was always dark. Every now and then a glowing fish bigger than the others would swim by, looking mournful with its big drooping mouth and sad eyes. Their despondent expressions inspired Jamie, for when a curious other fish came sniffing around a glower, it would let the new boy come close, get all sad for it, then strike. Big teeth those glowers.

Jamie smiled inside. He liked to learn from nature.

Nature was nobody's friend but its own. It was a tool to be used. No one will help you so you have to help yourself. The way of the world. Jamie remembered the Doctor had taught a different creed, and look how he had paid for it. Even the old clan ties seemed foolish now, here in this place. His laird Colin McClaren making them fight for a lost cause, heading to Culloden and doom. For what? His travels had shown that kings and all that was fool's stuff.

There was only one way: fight and survive, make sure you're the last man standing, nothing else.

Well, except revenge. That mattered.

Someone else was being held here in this prison. Jamie had worked out that much. Someone important too. Important enough to build the place at the bottom of the sea.

He'd had a glimpse of the security when they brought him down in the submarine. Automatic machine guns that

trained round as they led him out of the airlock. They had stapled some sort of badge on his hand - a load of lines and numbers, which you had to wave in front of the doors to get them to open.

They had stopped drugging him, so Jamie had begun to try and mark the layout and obstacles.

As far as he could understand, the prison was a hollow ring encircling a single globe - a windowless solid steel ball. This globe was attached to the outer ring by a single rigid tube they called an umbilical.

He and the guards lived in the ring. The important prisoner was inside the globe.

The ring itself was in sections. There was a main corridor about six feet wide, with two rooms per section on either side. Airlock hatches terminated the sections, which Jamie guessed could be sealed and lifted from the ring. So if one compartment got breached the whole prison wouldn't be flooded.

There were five gaolers staffing the prison, but it was all they needed. At any one time, at least one of them was inside the prohibited security section, the one with the umbilical that led to the globe. Jamie had never been in there.

The other four gaolers would either be sleeping or lounging around.

He learnt all this when they moved him out of solitary confinement.

When he hadn't attacked anyone or harmed himself or done anything stupid, the chief gaoler had come to speak to him.

Major Maxwell was like all prison bosses - methodical, short and self-important. He wore his black-and-white SILOET uniform with a great deal of pride and was forever picking specks of dirt from the garment. He was balding and sported a rather unfortunate moustache.

Maxwell had spoken to Jamie in a room with CREW LOUNGE stencilled on the door. An armed guard, whom Jamie learnt was called Cook, stood efficiently at that door, sub-machine gun in hand.

Maxwell held out a hand for Jamie to shake. Bewildered, Jamie shook it.

‘Macrimmon,’ said the major. ‘Sit down.’

Jamie looked round. The room was furnished with all the bright pastels and curvaceous furniture common to the whole of SILOET. He was suspicious of a trap.

Major Maxwell was inclined to pace rooms as he spoke, a little strut to remind everyone who was boss. Jamie determined to kill him last.

‘Now then Macrimmon,’ said Maxwell, ‘I have received orders that you are to be treated well, as if you are a patient suffering an illness. Well, let me tell you now,’ he gave Jamie what he believed was an imposing stare. ‘You may not be a prisoner in the strict sense of the word but these distinctions have no meaning for me. As far as I or any of my staff are concerned you *are* a prisoner. Understand?’

Jamie shrugged. ‘Aye. You mumble a little, but I understand you well enough.’ The first words since he’d been brought on board the prison. He’d been captured enough times to know that total dumb insolence was likely to be met with rifle butts. Mind, so was cheek.

Maxwell continued to pace. ‘I run a tight ship here, Macrimmon,’ he said, uncaring of the irony in his statement. ‘You will obey or be shot. Any attempt to escape or to make physical contact with the staff and you will be shot. All sections of this prison are monitored twenty four hours a day. There is no powered means of escape and all air locks are covered by automatic machine guns. So, you see, there’s really no point, you know... trying to... anything...’ he tailed off, unable to come up with a way of finishing this fine speech. Jamie wondered whether the other SILOET officers bullied him.

Maxwell coughed. ‘I hope that’s clear. You’ll be confined to the lounge. It won’t be uncomfortable, but you are not to be tempted to try any ‘exploring’. Now, we’re a busy institution and I’ve got a lot to do. Any questions?’

He had already started moving to the door, clearly not expecting Jamie to say anything.

'One question,' he said brightly.

Irritation was etched across the major's face. He was expecting something sarcastic. He braced himself. 'Yes?'

'Who's the other man here?'

A thin smile played across Maxwell's rosy cheeks. He looked at Jamie - a man with higher stakes to play. Without answering, he left the room.

After that, it was simple. As Jamie spent his days inside his two-roomed cage, looking out of the window, it came to him what it was that would keep him going. What it was that could sustain his hatred and deliver the means of striking back.

They had killed the Doctor and built that substitute. They had attacked Mackenzie. They were the enemy. The other prisoner was their enemy. What he would do was find a way to free that prisoner.

XVIII

The submarine *Manta* was angular, compact and damned uncomfortable.

Sleek and impressive on the outside to impress the credulous. But what about the passengers? What about seats?

Typical SILOET, thought Doctor Koslovski. All style and no substance.

The depth gauge indicated that the *Manta* was six hundred metres below the surface station. Surface station! An unmanned blip of rock somewhere in the South China Sea. The water was changing from green to deep blue as they descended. Koslovski felt his agitation increase. No doubt he was so edgy because of the knowledge that he would soon be in the proximity of that... man.

‘On approach now to OCEAN FLOOR,’ said Captain Hector, the too-young American who commanded this vessel. Koslovski was not fooled by the casual professionalism with which he flicked switches and twisted knobs. It wasn’t his youth so much as his nationality. Even the old ones acted like children. They always thought they knew best and seemed only capable of acting on impulses and whims... usually with disastrous consequences for themselves and everyone else.

‘Sending codes now,’ replied Faulkner, the co-pilot. Another child. Another American.

A series of burbles and beeps sounded through the hull. The *Manta* rocked, and Koslovski held up an arm to steady himself. He felt distinctly unwell.

‘Must we have this “stop and start”, Captain? They know we are coming.’

Captain Hector did not turn. 'If we don't go through the proper checks, we'll have a battery of missiles heading our way. I'm sure you wouldn't want -'

'Point taken,' Koslovski snapped. 'Just get me there.'

Lieutenant Faulkner grinned at him, his southern hick freckles glowing under his silly sailor's cap. 'I'd start getting your crap together, Doc. ETA two minutes.'

'If you mean by "my crap" the most advanced diagnostic equipment in SILOET's medical armoury, then I will indeed prepare said item.'

'That's what I said, Doc. Your crap.'

'So nice to be serving with you, gentlemen,' said Koslovski. 'Such culture and refinement are rare qualities these days.'

Captain Hector interrupted. He kept his gaze on the green swirl in front of them. 'How long are you going to take down there? I don't like that place.'

'As long as I deem necessary,' replied Koslovski. 'You think I want to be stuck there with him?'

'OK, but how long? Guess.'

Koslovski sighed. 'I don't know. We got the signal yesterday, and I have been travelling ever since.'

Faulkner was curious. 'What the hell's happened?'

'I can't tell you that, Lieutenant. Mainly because I don't know...'

'Yeah, right.'

'Would have saved you boys a trip if it had happened a week ago. I could have come in with the Macrimmon prisoner. Oh well. These things are sent to try us. Now, if you will excuse me, I have my "crap" to see to.' And with that, he turned away, just catching Captain Hector's muttered oath. About him. Koslovski grinned at hearing it. You could get their goat after all.

The *Manta* stepped up a gear. 'There we go,' said Hector. 'There it is.'

Koslovski couldn't resist, he sneaked a peek. They seemed very deep here, the water a thick, impermeable blue, almost black. He tried not to think about pressure.

Something flashed, like lightning behind a cloud. Then again and again.

'It's the beacon. We are locked on,' said Faulkner, all trace of his earlier flippancy suppressed.

The radio hissed into life. 'This is OCEAN FLOOR,' came a female voice. 'Your codes check out green, *Manta*. Welcome aboard.'

'M.I.C.' Hector replied.

'Roll out the red carpet, Doc,' sang Faulkner. 'We're here.'

'Up yours, Yahoo,' snarled Koslovski in Russian, and slunk back to his seat.

He had only just reached SKYHOME and unpacked when Bishop had ordered him out again. Something had happened on OCEAN FLOOR. The news had felt like a death sentence.

And now he was here, about to confront that abomination once more. Well, those *Manta* boys could just stay where they were and wait for him. He was not going to be stuck with no means of escape. Not Victor Koslovski.

Koslovski was all too aware that his reputation was based on his research into Shiners. In truth, that expertise consisted of observation of test subjects, brain scans and a quite startling amount of guesswork. Still, in all practical terms, the little he knew made him the world expert. Which is why Bishop had ordered him down. He was it.

Without any comprehension of the situation he now found himself in, one of the few straws Koslovski could clutch at was habit. The scientific process: collect data then try and make sense of it. Which is why he intended to carry out his own analysis of the prisoner. Koslovski wasn't one for idle speculation. Macrimmon's arrival might have been a catalyst, it might not. Koslovski would interview him anyway.

The report from Major Maxwell indicated the boy was behaving himself, very quiet and withdrawn. A sure sign he was still suffering from his paranoid delusions and was planning something. He hated SILOET. That wasn't just going to go away on its own.

Perhaps down here away from the Doctor and Zoe Heriot, he might be persuaded to confront his fears. A secondary mission. He liked the boy, but the Scot was nowhere near enough motivation to drag Koslovski down to OCEAN FLOOR.

Major Maxwell was waiting at the docking hatch.

‘Don’t you dare leave,’ Koslovski pointed a finger at the crew, who returned a sarcastic thumbs up. Faulkner threw him his titanium cased diagnostic laptop and smiled a cheesy grin.

Maxwell was sweating as he stapled an identification barcode on to the back of Koslovski’s left hand. The commandant’s moustache made him look like Hercule Poirot. Koslovski had read the major’s psych-evaluations and hadn’t liked what he had seen. But in this day and age who else were you going to get down here to do this job?

‘Any news?’ Koslovski asked. Maxwell hurried him through Entry Point.

‘No change,’ he replied. ‘But after thirty years of nothing...’ Koslovski realised the Major was speaking in this clipped manner to try and impress. ‘Don’t worry, Doctor. He’s not going to *escape*.’

There was a peculiar quality to this last word that disturbed Koslovski.

They reached the first checkpoint. A pair of large-calibre, robotic gun barrels swivelled to cover the corridor. A mechanical voice growled, ‘Identify yourself!’

Maxwell waved a hand across the security reader and the huge, double-walled cylinder door turned to reveal an opening. More nervously, Koslovski did the same. The pair stepped through. Two armed guards waited for them in Security Control. They came to attention as Maxwell entered.

Koslovski scanned the room. Diagnostic computers, security bank, umbilicus airlock, a thousand alarms. As safe as SILOET could manage, and upgraded as often as budget allowed. The prison was as safe as could humanly be constructed. He caught himself. Human. Yes, well perhaps that was the limitation.

He thumped his laptop on to a spare square of table.

‘Can I get you anything?’ asked Maxwell. ‘Some... refreshment?’ He clearly didn’t like having senior officers disrupting his routine. Especially someone medical. Or maybe it was his accent that got the major’s back up.

‘No, thank you,’ Koslovski replied. ‘Believe me, I’m here purely as a risk assessor. As soon as I’m done, I am history.’

Major Maxwell turned to leave, then turned back. His moustache quivered. ‘Tell me, Doctor...’

‘Hmm?’

‘Is it true? Are they... the aliens... are they really back?’

Koslovski flicked the laptop into life. ‘It appears so, Major.’ He sensed the tension in the room. ‘Hopefully what we find here will enable us to be sure.’

The Major nodded, over-dutifully, and left.

Koslovski looked at the guards’ worried faces, then bent to work, spooling out the wires and clips that would enable his machine to talk to the OCEAN FLOOR network.

A few moments fiddling, and then a beep of success. The vital signs popped up on his screen - the data from instruments bored deep into the concrete that filled the central globe on the other side of the umbilical corridor. A name popped up, identifying the producer of these new and sudden alpha brainwaves. That name was Taylor. Karl Taylor.

Doctor Koslovski had made his name with Taylor. Karl Taylor aka The Man in Black aka Captain Death. The PRISM man turned bad. He made his reputation because he was the one who had thought up the way to get him.

Koslovski remembered the panic that could be engendered by the merest suspicion of Taylor’s presence. City, secret base, wherever.

How he operated, who his compatriots were, how he seemed to travel so quickly and easily, were never discovered. All that was known was that Captain Taylor was returned to Earth as a walking killing machine.

After that first encounter in the French graveyard, where the Myloki deposited him on Earth, SILOET next met Taylor

in New York. He was planting nuclear bombs, particularly dirty ones, when Captain Nelson traced him to Times Square.

Taylor was cornered in an alleyway. He walked through a hail of gunfire and shot dead eight PRISM troops as he went. Next thing you know, goodbye New York.

After Matthews came back and was turned, Captain Taylor seemed to change his prerogatives. He made a beeline for Matthews, wherever he was. That pair was always butting heads. Half of PRISM's job became keeping people out of the way of their destructive, ultimately self-defeating duels. Koslovski shuddered to think how much property damage they caused.

Captain Matthew's reaction to the knowledge that his competitor was back and responsible for some latest atrocity became a matter of course. It was the one occasion guaranteed to rouse strong feeling in the otherwise placid man. Perhaps it was because Taylor reminded him of what he was, and worse, what he could have been.

As for how Taylor felt, well, that blank, lifeless face seemed incapable of expression. It was more that he possessed a blind, unthinking aura of death. He couldn't kill enough.

There weren't many witnesses who could describe the man in black; the general gist of his encounters was that you met him and he murdered you. But Koslovski could pick up the aura even from the few fragments of recorded footage. Those black eyes seemed to stare through you, out of the screen. Stare into your beating heart like the eyes of the reaper himself. Ready to collect what it wanted.

Koslovski had spent a long time studying Taylor. Colonel LeBlanc had been certain that he had to have a weakness, an Achilles heel. Koslovski wasn't so sure.

To this day he didn't know whether the assassin was self-aware or not. Was there a rudimentary intelligence? Certainly, he could operate machinery, drive or fly any vehicle he seemed to get into, and clearly had powers of deliberation and improvisation. But was he truly sentient? Did he have a consciousness beyond his programming? The answer to that question was known only by the Myloki.

Now, here on OCEAN FLOOR, as Koslovski monitored the newly awakened brain activity, he found himself realising that he still had no idea.

His mind travelled back over the years to the capture. The showdown between the two titans. An elaborate trap initiated by himself, Colonel LeBlanc and Lieutenant Verdana.

By keeping Matthews on SKYHOME, they knew that Taylor would be impelled to come up after him eventually. Somehow, this dynamic duo had a link, something... telepathic.

And come he did. In a stolen CHERUB fighter, right into the heart of PRISM.

Colonel LeBlanc ordered no one to stand in the creature's way. He was to be allowed free passage into the designated area. The hangar where Captain Matthews stood waiting for him.

Taylor nearly evaded them, and Koslovski remembered his horror as it seemed the whole plan was about to fall to pieces. Had that happened, PRISM would have been annihilated.

For some reason, totally against expectation, Taylor didn't take the bait. Instead, he made for the Control Centre, deliberately avoiding the enticing hangar. Whether he or the Myloki guessed what had been planned, no one ever determined.

Security guards were mobilised and attempts made to hold back his march through the headquarters. All that happened was the death of those who stood in his way.

Finally Matthews disobeyed orders and left his post to help. The Control Centre was cleared. Only Colonel LeBlanc remained, knowing he must delay Taylor long enough to give Matthews time to get there. He re-routed generator systems into a hand-held power unit and as Taylor walked in the colonel clamped the connector pad on to his opponent's chest. Captain Taylor grabbed LeBlanc and snapped his spinal column just as the electric shock ripped through his body. Temporarily stunned, Taylor lost balance and

coordination, and Matthews and a few others managed to haul the disabled creature back to the hangar.

Taylor struggled fiercely as his senses tried to reorient themselves but finally Matthews managed to drop him into the pre-prepared exhaust vent. As he struggled like a spider in the tube, the trap was sprung. A blast from Verdana's patiently assembled jamming system cut out whatever signals Taylor was believed to be receiving. The assassin stopped struggling and stood still - apparently confused. Koslovski remembered activating the machinery that dropped six thousand litres of modified liquid concrete on top of the captain. SKYHOME itself had dipped with the weight.

Then there was the awful vigil, watching that soup thicken into paste, then solid rock. PRISM had modified the usual aggregates, making the concrete harder than diamond. Despite that, Koslovski was sure he wasn't the only one convinced that Taylor was going to crawl his way out.

They trapped him like a fly in amber - then built a titanium globe around him and buried it at the bottom of the sea. There he had stayed, from that day to this.

For a while they had wondered whether he would try and break out. After all, PRISM was still a year away from Matthews' fateful rendezvous on the moon. But no. Nothing. Sensitive probes were implanted in the concrete to detect brain activity. Koslovski had performed the delicate operation himself - solar-laser drilling the microfibre optic wires through the rock, right to the immobilised skull itself.

The probes revealed a total lack of activity.

The Myloki had abandoned Taylor, left him there forever. Captain Death had been vanquished.

Until last Tuesday.

Koslovski looked up from his screen. The alpha waves were pulsing, regular and steady. Something was going on inside that brain. Was it... Taylor... aware of its surroundings? Had it been aware all the time?

This was one area of activity that Koslovski could quite happily never research again. He had done his bit. Now he just wanted to get out of here. This prison had an unpleasant

smell about it. Despite everything, all the precautions, it stank of fear.

The guards were eyeing him warily as he disconnected the laptop. He bit his lip, wondering what the hell good he was supposed to be doing.

Suddenly he felt manipulated, used. Forces over his head, as immense as the ocean, seemed to be pressing down on him. Someone was splitting SILOET up, separating the components that made it work. He wondered what the Myloki were up to. What were they planning in whatever incomprehensible place it was they existed?

Koslovski stared at the prison monitoring system. Active twenty-four hours a day, a thousand alarms, fail-safed to the nth degree. But if *he* got out - no, no it wasn't possible. If he did, that would be the end. It couldn't happen. And if they were going to spring him, it was beyond Doctor Koslovski's powers of reason as to how. An army couldn't get Karl Taylor out of that globe.

'Well?' asked one of the duty guards. 'What d'you make of it?' He was eating an apple.

'Oh, I don't think you've got anything to worry about,' Koslovski replied. 'There's no way he can escape. Even if you tried to let him.'

'Ha ha.'

Koslovski snapped the laptop shut. He stifled his deep breath. No sense in spooking these guards any more than they already were.

He wanted off this prison. Now.

Maxwell accompanied Koslovski back to the *Manta*. The Doctor swung the laptop casually at his side with a jollity he didn't really feel. He just didn't want the commandant to think he was rattled.

'Waste of time,' Maxwell snapped. 'Knew it would be.'

Koslovski decided to assert a little authority. 'Commander Bishop is thorough. He wants to be sure.'

The moustache bristled. 'I run a very tight ship, you know.' He waved them through the next security point. 'If there's trouble, it won't come from here.'

The door of the *Manta* hissed open. Inside, Hector and Faulkner were preparing the pre-sail checks. 'That was quick,' drawled the captain.

Koslovski faced Maxwell, who clearly couldn't wait to get rid of him. You'd think he'd be glad of the company. They shook hands.

'You're not bothering with the Macrimmon boy then?' Maxwell asked with an unmistakable sneer, as if Koslovski had forgotten.

'Well, you know, I wasn't.' He smiled pleasantly. 'But now you have reminded me, I think I will. As I say, the Commander is very thorough.'

For a second, Major Maxwell looked as if he would literally explode.

Doctor Koslovski was reassured at least. Despite his personal dislike of the man, Major Maxwell did as he boasted and actually appeared to run a tight ship - both literally and metaphorically. Everything that could be done had been done.

Still, he didn't want to hang around here on OCEAN FLOOR. The place unnerved him - perhaps he had too much imagination. Yeah, and perhaps he should just get out of here, now. Get the hell back to the *Manta*.

No, let us be scientific and humane. Pop in, see Macrimmon, have a chat... then get the hell back to the *Manta*.

After all, it was highly probable that Bishop would want an update on the boy's condition, if only to keep that strange Doctor fellow soft.

Such an advanced state of psychosis was rare these days. Mental illness was now a mundane topic - it was all anomie and depression at the state of the world. At least Macrimmon's condition was colourful. It reminded Koslovski of all the sad cases after the war. Especially after the

publication of Neville's book, when those who read it realised that all their paranoid fears about the world were actually true. There really had been a conspiracy after all.

Koslovski chuckled as he reached the prison's second inmate's cell - a lounge. Now secured with electronic locks and sensors. However, a lounge.

Not that Macrimmon was anything to worry about. Without proximity to the sources of his anguish, he should eventually heal. Still, it might be useful to administer a truth drug to see if he was planning anything silly.

Actually, thought Koslovski, it was a good idea to come and visit him. The boy would benefit from seeing a familiar face. Give him a helping hand.

The lock clicked once and Koslovski walked in. The door slid shut and locked behind him.

Jamie sat at a low table. He was eating. With his fingers. They had put him in a spare uniform and tagged him, the ubiquitous barcode on the back of the hand - a blob of electronics that dictated who he was and where he was able to go. Cameras on him all the time.

'Doctor!' said Macrimmon, clearly genuinely pleased to see him.

He's so young, thought Koslovski. So innocent. Where does he come from?

'Just thought I'd pop in, Jamie. How are you? Are you behaving yourself?' He crossed to the table and sat down opposite the young Scot.

'The food could be better,' said Jamie and showed him the unappetising rations on his plate.

'I see. Well, I'll see what I can do about that. Is there anything else?'

Jamie chewed a particularly tough piece of... what was it? Something very nearly meat. Koslovski reached into his medical bag to bring out the truth drug.

'Well, there is one thing,' said Jamie. He stood up and punched Koslovski hard in the face.

Koslovski felt the blow hit him like a hammer. He felt cartilage breaking in his nose and the room spin. The pain

was like a tidal wave of fire. He felt hot blood fill his face. 'No...', he tried to say, but couldn't form the words.

He tried to stand but Macrimmon hit him again. The last thing Koslovski saw was the makeshift knife in his hand. 'Sorry Doctor,' he said. 'Sorry.'

XIX

Of course, the alarms went off immediately. Jamie didn't know what kind of devils they had that could see everything, but they were damned good. Clever enough to see their own heads backwards.

Well then, he had to move fast. He laughed out loud. After all this waiting around, speed would feel even sweeter. Even if it didn't last and they got him, it would be worth it.

Speed was the key. Nothing ever changed here, just the old routine and Jamie had seen that the gaolers were slow and tired.

He had been surprised when it had been Doctor Koslovski who had walked in, but that didn't matter. There was a pang of regret when he did what he had to do, but he could deal with regret. He was good at that.

Finishing his work, Jamie stood up from Koslovski's prone body. The blade he'd fashioned from shards of plastic and metal was fairly blunt, but still capable of doing the job he'd asked of it. His hands ran with blood.

Darting over to the door, which he knew had automatically double locked, he listened for approaching feet. Nothing yet.

Speed, speed was the essence.

Cook's echoing voice rang round the lounge. 'Macrimmon! What happened? You hit him!'

Jamie gave the watching cameras his most innocent and concerned face. 'I dinnae ken! He started to choke or something - I reached out to help him. I think he's hurt!'

'Don't move,' barked the suspicious voice.

The alarm was still singing away when he heard the guard arrive at the door. Jamie hopped from one bare foot to the other. This was going to be the real trick. Wait wait wait wait wait.

The guard sang out, 'Step away from the door!'

He obeyed, preparing himself.

The lock clicked and the door slid open.

‘He’s hurt bad!’ Jamie screeched. ‘Help him!’

Cook, armoured up and weapon in hand, reacted quickly to the shout, jumping in straight to the prone body. The second guard hung in the doorway, aiming a machine pistol at Jamie.

Who flung the knife at his face.

The guard instinctively flinched, as expected. Jamie remembered how his father had beaten this reflex out of him long ago. It took a long time, but it separated the men from the boys right enough. The knife, useless as a weapon, bounced harmlessly off the guard’s collar, but by then it was too late. Jamie had launched himself at him and through the open door. The guard yelled as he hit the floor. The gun clattered. Jamie was more concerned about Cook still in the room. How quick was he? Forget it. Forget about him.

He grabbed the head of the guard beneath him and thumped it once into the metal floor. It crunched and the body went limp. Immediately, each stage of this well-rehearsed routine arranged in a strict order in his mind, he rolled violently to the left. He was up and slamming down on the manual lock.

Cook was reasonably quick - he snapped a shot off as the door swivelled closed. Too late. Aim spoilt by not wanting to hit his mate.

Jamie, pleased with himself, rolled back and extracted the machine pistol from the guard’s grip.

By the time Maxwell had ordered a lockdown, Jamie was off and running.

‘Macrimmon!’ came the voice over the speakers. ‘Where do you think you can go? There is no escape. Give yourself up!’ Jamie could almost see the spittle firing from Maxwell’s mouth. He laughed heartily. He was a true Highlander.

‘If you do not stop now, you will reach an automatically armed checkpoint. These machine guns are programmed to kill. Stop now and you will not be harmed!’

Aye, thought Jamie. I’ve heard that before.

He darted along the curving corridor, trying not to think what would happen when he reached the checkpoint.

There they were, the two stubby black barrels. As one, each opposing weapon came to bear on him. 'Identify yourself!' bellowed the grating voice he had expected.

This was the moment. He would succeed or die. He held up his left hand, the one covered with the electronic pass he had carved from the doctor's hand and slapped over his own.

There was a beat where he felt the thrill of danger, almost a taste in his mouth. Would they really believe him?

The guns drooped and the door opened. Yes. Yes, he had succeeded.

Jamie threw himself into the Security Control area like a bullet. The female guard, he didn't know her name, was raising a pistol. Her hand shook. 'How did you...'

Jamie piled into her, slamming her padded body into a console. A host of lights clicked on and off and electronic beeps squealed out, shocked into life by the impact.

He rabbit punched her behind the ear and she dropped, out cold.

He had time now, time to catch his breath.

'Red alert! Red alert!' Maxwell was screaming over the intercom. Jamie wished he could find the button that would turn it off.

He only had a few minutes. They must have some kind of plan to deal with escaping prisoners. Maybe gas, like in the air base. He had to keep in his head that speed was his only advantage. That and the fact that he wasn't actually trying to escape.

Shuddering, he rubbed his chin with his slippery hand. What could he do? How could he make it happen?

A movement outside the door, and on a monitor screen Jamie spotted the arriving commandant.

'Macrimmon!' Maxwell yelled, his voice flattened by the mechanical speaker. 'Give yourself up, there's no escape.' The machinery didn't conceal the tremor underneath the words.

There was only one thing for it. He snatched the pistol from the unconscious guard, shielded his face, and pumped shot after shot into every possible machine he could see. The noise was deafening.

The Security Centre went mad. Smoke mingled in with the cordite. An electrical fire sputtered into life inside a console. The lights turned red and a new klaxon joined in the pandemonium.

He stood, sweating in the middle of this packed room. Well, he had given it everything. Now they would kill him.

A bank of monitors filled one wall. A few of the cameras were still operational. On one black-and-white screen guards dashed through the corridors. On another, his old room with Cook unkeying the locked door. Koslovski's prone form still lying sprawled across the dinner table.

Last action. He was ready. Jamie sat down on one of the efficient swivel chairs. He watched a third screen, the one that showed the inner globe. It sat calm and placid, dull and still in the camera's glare.

Orange flames were licking out of one of the terminals. A rushing noise seemed to block the exterior din from his mind. There was no air in here; he couldn't breathe, the fire was sucking it from the sealed room. The end was closing in. The end of this warped, hellish reality.

He found himself calm, memories rushing at him as if clamouring to be recalled. They started to unravel and he realised just how they had been clumped and glued together in a ball of confusion.

Mr Mackenzie explaining the pain to him, a Cyberman looming on a space station, seaweed bunching in a tank, Ben and Polly laughing, and him... the Doctor, the real Doctor looking at him in that sad, sad way. Understanding the pain, how much it hurt him, how much he wanted to be that other Jamie again, when everything made sense.

He didn't want to think any more.

Water burst from the ceiling in thick, driving droplets.

On the screen the globe remained implacable and still. Ignoring the rain running down his head, into his mouth,

eyes and clothes, Jamie just stared. The flames hissed and squirmed as they died. Almost of its own accord, his arm raised the pistol to his temple. He could see nothing but the metal globe on the screen. His finger felt the cold strip of the trigger.

They must have broken the locks as he waited. Time had no meaning any more. All of a sudden he heard a grinding of the gears in the door. They were on their way in.

Now, he thought, pull the trigger. Last chance.

‘Put it down, Macrimmon,’ Maxwell warned over the loudspeakers. ‘We’re coming in. If you resist, we’ll kill you.’

His finger was locked. Do it, end the pain and the darkness. He was ready, God he was ready. Why was he waiting?

The heavy door whirled open and Jamie saw the barrel of a gun pushing through. Without even thinking, he dived out of the chair. A short burst of fire blasted deafening explosions into the Security Centre. The padded chair burst apart.

A guard stepped in, shotgun raised and smoking. Jamie rolled on the soaking floor and raised his pistol to fire. The guard looked at him. Jamie found himself smiling - a corpse’s smile. ‘*Craigh an tor,*’ he snarled and pulled the trigger. No thoughts of killing himself now. His own history forced him to go down fighting.

The guard froze, horrified. The pistol clicked. Empty. Jamie tried again. Nothing.

The guard smiled. It was the one Jamie had bashed in the corridor. He was spitting teeth into his helmet. ‘You little bastard,’ he said, raising the shotgun.

A heavy armoured hand knocked the gun aside. Maxwell. Not such a big idiot after all.

‘No more shooting! For God’s sake.’ He walked in, clumsy in his padding. ‘There’s been enough damage.’ He coughed. ‘Auxiliary oxygen. Now!’

Voice-activated pumps chugged into life. A cool wind fanned Jamie’s face.

He backed against the hatch to the umbilical. He was spent. At last the sprinkler system kicked off. The fires were

out. The Security Centre was full of the stench of smoke and ruined equipment.

‘You idiot,’ Maxwell hissed at him. ‘What have you done?’

‘Just kill me,’ Jamie replied. ‘If you’ve got the courage.’

‘Oh,’ said Maxwell. ‘I intend to. Sergeant Cook. Take this little swine and eject him from airlock number three. I look forward to seeing you float past my bedroom window, Macrimmon.’

Two other guards shouldered their way into the cramped room and began to revive their unconscious counterpart. She moaned as waking life hammered home.

Maxwell looked round at the damage. ‘Is it still secure? Come on.’ No need to ask what he meant.

Cook clipped a small computer box into the least ruined console. After a minute, it beeped into life. He read the data scrolling across the screen. ‘He’s wrecked the main terminal and the primary back-up system. It’s a wonder he didn’t tear the whole station apart. We’re on emergency bypass systems.’

Maxwell lunged at Jamie, then checked himself. He lacked the courage to have an actual go. He was terrified, they all were. Jamie realised they actually believed he could have succeeded.

Cook slumped. He breathed heavily. Maxwell looked sick. ‘Well?’

‘Still secure,’ said Cook, weary relief evident in his tone.

The commandment brushed water from his uniform. ‘So, you thought to release him, eh? You really are mad.’ He slapped Jamie.

A thump rang through the superstructure. A dull thump, weak.

Maxwell stopped speaking. He looked sick again.

A second thump, stronger.

The whole room stopped. No one moved. If he was aware that nobody was thinking about him any more, Jamie was in no position to take advantage of it. His limbs had frozen.

‘He can’t... can’t get out,’ said Maxwell. ‘They said.’

Jamie looked at the monitor to see the globe's picture had altered. It seemed to be bleeding white liquid into the umbilical.

'Ruptured? How can that happen?' breathed Maxwell.

Cook was staring at the box in his hand, at the figures rolling by. 'The instruments,' said Cook. 'They must be faulty...'

'What?' yelled Maxwell. 'What do they say?'

At last Cook looked up, fear etched on to his face. 'The temperature in there. It... something's melting the concrete.'

'That's impossible. That kind of heat...'

Another thump and this time Jamie saw a ripple in the smooth metal of the globe.

Maxwell grabbed Jamie by the lapels of his uniform. 'Don't you know what you've let loose?' he shrieked, eyes bulging. 'What did you do?'

'Major!' yelled Cook. He hauled Maxwell off. Jamie shoved them both away.

'It wasn't him,' Cook said. He didn't even see Jamie. 'It couldn't be.'

'Then how?' Fingers grinding into the console, Maxwell glared up at the roof. He took a breath. 'Unless *they* helped him... Them.'

More clangs and bangs. The prison shook under the weight of a phenomenal impact.

'He's punching his way out,' said Jamie, wondering just what kind of man they had in there. Beginning to think he had made a mistake.

'It can't be...' Maxwell seemed bewildered, lost to everything. 'How can he do that?'

'Major!'

Another thump. The whole room rattled. Maxwell shrieked.

The sergeant smashed his hand down on the console. He looked up. 'Temperature sensors have malfunctioned. Went off the scale.'

'What can we do?' There was a definite tinge of hysteria in Maxwell's voice now. The other guards looked like they wished they'd already left.

‘Evacuate,’ Cook said. ‘Set the self-destruct and get the hell out.’

Another thump and the globe tore open. White stuff, like wet plaster poured into the umbilical corridor. Unbelievable heat, felt even from here.

‘He’s out,’ whispered Maxwell. ‘Oh God, he’s out.’

‘Sir!’ bellowed Cook.

The guards were already running from the room. They shoved Jamie aside in their haste. Cook took one final look at his commanding officer, then Jamie, then followed.

Maxwell dropped to his knees at the umbilical hatch. White fluid was already halfway up over the viewing window. Jamie saw the Plexiglass buckle under the searing heat. Steam screamed in the tube as the concrete melted through metal and out into seawater.

Maxwell punched panels embedded in the walls. Levers dropped out of tight-fitting holes at each of the four curved corners. ‘Manual locks. Manual locks should do it.’

Watching as if in a dream, Jamie hauled himself up. Boiling liquid gurgled through grills in the floor. The umbilical was flooded with the white milk. Something was moving through it.

The glass panel burst open. Maxwell screamed as the molten concrete poured over him.

Jamie dived on to a console, feeling his skin peel as steam billowed out across the room. He covered his eyes, knuckles blistering. He smelt boiled flesh.

The temperature dropped, alarmingly quickly. Furnace, flame, warmth, relief...

From feeling the steam sear his lungs, Jamie began to shiver. Water was pouring everywhere.

He opened his eyes.

Maxwell sat at the doorway, a wreck. His blistered lips mouthed some final, silent order. He would never see again. The wrecked Security Control was now appallingly silent.

A cold white arm stretched through the smashed umbilical hatch and began to move around, searching.

Jamie tried to rise and warn Maxwell, but slipped off the sodden console and crashed over the ruined equipment.

He watched through a moist haze as the arm located the commandant. It yanked him up and slammed him into the hatch doorway. Hoarse, the commandant began to yell, 'Help me, oh God help me!' His sightless eyes stared at Jamie and then his voice rose to an agonised screech.

His legs began to thrash and kick at the thick-buckled metal. Jamie heard something rip, then Maxwell dropped away, released.

His arm had been torn off at the shoulder. He slid down the wall, eyes still locked on Jamie, grey porridge solidifying in his twitching mouth. Jamie cowered into the dripping gutter. He pushed himself beneath the machinery.

The hatch burst open as if ripped. It cannoned across the floor. Jamie buried himself as best he could as the remains of the concrete leaked over him. White mud streaked with red. He held his breath as it swirled round him.

The room fell silent but for the moaning commandant's last murmurs. Someone walked in, boots clanging on metal. Jamie smelt something very bad, like off milk, or rotten food. The footsteps were slow. Implacable. Apart from that there was no noise at all. No breathing. Nothing.

Unhurried, the footsteps strode right past him and out of the room.

How long he lay there, he didn't know. Perhaps he could just not move again. After all, this was what he had wanted, wasn't it? To let this man out, whoever he was.

So why did he have the feeling he had made a terrible, terrible mistake? That somehow, everything in his life had been one big series of misunderstandings and errors. What was he going to do now?

His thoughts of suicide already seemed like belonging to a different Jamie. He had to act, to do something or he would lie here and die. Get up, he ordered himself, get up now.

Slowly, aware of his various pains, he staggered to his feet. He felt blistered all over. But he wasn't Maxwell. He was alive.

Weapon. Get a weapon.

Maxwell's shotgun lay across a soaked and blackened terminal. Jamie hefted it up and felt its weight. Aye, he could use this against whatever it was that had walked out of that globe. He caught a sight of himself in a blank monitor screen. Dark eyes glared out from a thickly smeared white head. He looked like a jungle savage.

It was time to find out what he had unleashed.

Creeping out of the ruins of the Security Centre, Jamie was surprised to see how untouched the corridor was. He had expected the whole base to have caved in. White footprints led up to the next hatch. There was a trail he could follow.

He could hear nothing but the creaking of the superstructure. Water pressure. The whole place felt deserted.

Was there any way off this damn prison? Where could the guards have disappeared to? Surely they would have had some kind of escape boat.

Shock hit him. He reeled, feeling sick and dizzy, falling against a bulkhead.

The last thing he had expected was to be breathing and alone. He had a chance to live, to do what the Doctor would expect of him. Maybe he could...

Jamie stopped himself. For the first time he had thought of the Doctor as alive, that the creature they had paraded in front of him, with all its poisonous sympathy, as the real thing. What then?

He couldn't afford to believe that. He couldn't.

Keep walking the corridors. Just keep walking.

This section of the big ring was unfamiliar. Maybe it was the way out.

The unnatural quiet remained, haunting after all the shenanigans. The red lights still flashed, but apart from that everything seemed suspiciously normal.

Jamie was alert to every slight noise, every puff of air. Whatever had been released was around here. It had spared him once, hadn't even noticed him, but he doubted he would be so lucky again.

He waved past two more sentry guns, wincing as they bellowed out their 'Identify yourself!' warning. Trust them still to work.

Footsteps, heading towards him, just round the curve. The worst possible place. Jamie didn't have time to duck or hide. He would have to face it down.

A man staggered round the corner clutching a bleeding hand. His eyes were wide with shock, his hair turned white. As Jamie watched, he stumbled into a wall, looking backwards. He was muttering to himself, scared out of his mind.

Jamie almost moved. Not quite. With agonising slowness, the man's head turned and spotted him. The mouth moved, yet no words formed. Doctor Koslovski. He stared at Jamie.

'Macrimmon! Thank God!' Obviously, he was so crazed he couldn't even remember what Jamie had done to him. 'You can get me out of here. We have to... to...'

He turned back again, tears rolling down his face. 'He'll kill us all.'

Any ally was better than none. Jamie took a step forward.

'We can... we can get to the *Manta*. Work together, stay rational...' the doctor moaned. 'You see... he can't die. Captain Death...'

'Aye,' said Jamie. 'But we can make -'

He was drowned out by the harsh bellow of the ... oh no...

'Identify yourself!'

Koslovski stood stock still, frozen in terror and utterly bewildered.

'Run!' yelled Jamie.

Koslovski raised his wounded hands. 'No!' he whimpered. 'I'm safe. I have authority...'

Jamie dropped to the floor. From behind him he heard the sentry guns rise up. He saw Koslovski's disbelief and confusion and then they opened up on him.

The corridor flashed bright, on and on and on, the sound like a giant hammer being pounded, endless. The thumping guns pumped hole after hole into Koslovski's chest. He danced, jerked on the spot, then flew backwards. The guns whined down into neutral, smoke pouring from their barrels.

Once again, Jamie was flat on the floor, hands over his ears. He felt his heart pounding against the metal.

Hell, he thought. Hell is when it's your fault.

He was still alive, somehow. Shaking with fear and excitement, soaked and battered, but alive. For now, that was all that could matter.

He raised his eyes and made himself look. Koslovski lay crookedly across the corridor up ahead. Blood was pooling out from under him. Thin spirals of smoke drifted up from the doctor's torn clothing. The guns had almost cut him in half.

Well, he had his revenge. A bellyful of it and that knowledge didn't make him feel better, not one bit of it. For a second, he was a boy again, needing to run and cry to his father.

They were dead and it was his fault.

And then Jamie did cry. Hot fierce tears as he poured out all the poison Mackenzie and Bishop and Maxwell had filled him up with. Let it all out and keep on living. He beat the floor until his hands bruised.

He only stopped when he heard more gunfire. Lots of it.

Jamie blinked. More to do. Much more.

He walked along in a daze, wiping away filthy tears. The gunfire mingled with screams. It sounded like a full-scale war up ahead. Enough firepower to sink a battleship. He resolved to do what he could.

One thought came to him. Koslovski had died because Jamie had cut the electronic thing out of his hand. The sentry guns hadn't been appeased.

Well, Captain Death wouldn't have an electronic thing either, would he? How come the guns hadn't cut him in half? Jamie tried to think, scientific things the Doctor would know. Perhaps they only blasted living men - heat or something. Which would mean...

He didn't want to think that far.

The corridor itself was a ruin. Gunfire had ripped it up. They had been moving backwards in a planned retreat, firing as they went. None of it had done any good.

Creeping round the final curve, Jamie saw an abattoir. Empty cartridge cases, discarded weapons and guards lay in the corridor. Pieces of them, hurled all over the place like a storm of teeth had ripped through them.

Yes, this was hell, thought Jamie. Mr Mackenzie's had been bad. The cellar with the thing in it was bad. This was the worst. He could have stopped this happening and didn't.

But he would survive. He had to.

Straight ahead, he saw a hatch begin to close. An umbilical, and past that the open door of some sort of submarine. It was charging up, lights coming on inside its shell. Powerful spinning engines began to mix the water, making the prison shake with the noise.

Jamie sprinted straight for it.

XX

SILOET had lost contact with OCEAN FLOOR. Another plan shot to hell.

Bishop resigned himself to the fact that he was going to have to assume the worst.

Controlling the rage inside him, he turned away from the lounge windows where he spent most of his nights watching the Myloki build their sky sculpture. He paced the empty room for a while, smoking his eighth cigar of the twenty-four hour period.

Whatever they were up to was proceeding in an impressively unhurried manner.

The night sky was thick with the odd, geometric lines being sketched across it. Four days now they had been firming up, becoming clearer, like matchsticks of lightning. As Bishop watched, a grid of the skeletal shapes began to glow with energy. He knew what was coming. The ghostly light coalesced in one particular line and a brief stab of luminous flame darted to the Earth. SKYHOME was over South America now. Bishop wondered where the beam had hit, what part of the planet it had... infected.

He no longer slept. He'd had enough of waking up in a panic, sweating with fear and indecision, so he had prescribed himself pills to stay awake. Pills that sent his heart racing.

What did it matter? He was either correct in his judgements or the Earth was finished. A unique spin, he thought, on the old adage 'victory or death'.

He looked up at the intricate sky mesh once more. Was he looking at a Myloki? An actual creature? If you are beyond human comprehension, Bishop wondered, what do you think of us?

Thirty years to unravel a mystery, had he figured it out correctly?

He had to keep his mind clear, despite the fatigue. SILOET was a diversion, a distraction from the main business. Hopefully enough of a nuisance to take up the Myloki's time whilst Alex and the Doctor achieved their aim.

The intercom stuttered its static. 'Commander Bishop,' came Lieutenant Anouska's voice. 'Please report to the Control Centre.'

An irritant. Well, he thought, let's start irritating.

The Control Centre was full of all available personnel. The women were clustered around communications. He looked for Alex, then checked himself. This was no time to be sloppy. They had to succeed. Zoe Heriot was tucked in a corner, operating the main computer terminal. She would have to be enough.

'Launch in six minutes, Commander,' said Anouska, cold and efficient. The crisis had brought out the best in her. Shame about the other girl, what was her name? Gabrielle. She had collapsed. She was down in the medical bay, strapped up in some padded cell. Perhaps she was the clever one.

'All right, let's get this show on the road,' he said.

Zoe swirled around in her chair. Her wig had slipped, making her look even more childish. He felt an odd desire to straighten it for her.

'Computers are synchronised and online.' She knew her computers, though. If only they'd had her ten years ago.

'Captain Adams on the video-link, Commander.'

Bishop sat down in his command chair, aware of how battered and dented the old white control panel had become.

He flicked a monitor switch. On the screen, a line of seated Lunar Base technicians made up a miniature mission control. Adams was leaning over one of the terminals, personally supervising the launch. He was every inch the handsome space captain - giant physical frame and cropped grey hair.

‘How are the pilots, Tom?’ asked Bishop.

Adams leant into the microphone, smiling. ‘Oh, they’re raring to go, Commander. Ready to shove it down their throats.’

It. Or rather they. Mini Z-bombs. A final defensive measure never meant for use in Earth orbit. Two of them and another less fatal bomb for the secondary target.

‘Are you sure the fail-safes are operational?’

Adams nodded. ‘We wouldn’t want them to hit you now, would we?’

‘M.I.C.’ said Bishop. Hallelujah.

The Z-bombs for the mesh, the other for the old Myloki base on the lunar surface. Just in case. Let’s see if makes any difference.

‘Earthrise coming up now, Captain,’ said one of the mission controllers. Bishop didn’t know whether to envy Lunar Base or not. They were outside the web. A unique perspective.

The view flicked to the moon’s curved surface. Slowly, over the horizon, the great hemisphere of the Earth grew bright, lit by flashes of the Myloki’s glow.

‘Ready on the pads, BLOCKADES,’ said Adams. ‘We may not be alone.’

Bishop stretched, forcing himself to stay relaxed in the face of the exhaustion, the pills and, of course, the Myloki invasion.

‘One minute,’ said Anouska.

‘Courses plotted for optimum impact time,’ said Zoe. Her pride in her calculations was evident.

‘Prelaunch,’ ordered Bishop.

The view flicked again. The three BLOCKADES rose to the surface on their pads, bombs protruding from their nose cones. They looked like deranged mechanical dragonflies.

Light from the Sun, reflected on to the Earth, then back to the moon, pulled away shadows from the spacecraft, like the removal of drapes. Silently, the BLOCKADES began to shake, and balls of dust burst out beneath their hulls.

‘Do it,’ ordered Bishop.

‘Lift off,’ snapped Adams. ‘Lift off.’

With a speed only possible thanks to reduced gravity, the attack craft shot straight up into the sky. The rear rocket engines kicked in and the BLOCKADES were away, in tight formation across the lunar surface.

'No alteration in Myloki energy configurations,' said Zoe, scanning one of her several terminals. Bishop could see her interpreting the impossible numbers.

'They may not have detected us,' said Adams.

'Great,' Bishop replied. 'Now all we need is a solid target.' He looked at Zoe again. That was her job. Scanners had detected a huge energy concentration in some central nexus whenever the mesh, or whatever it was, prepared to send down one of its lances of light to the Earth's surface. It had been conjectured that there may be something material, something to hit, at those centres. Bishop had his doubts.

The Control Centre fell silent. Everyone was watching the screens.

Suddenly Bishop felt exhilarated. He stifled an urge to laugh in triumph. This was the game and he was in charge. Everything he had waited for was about to play out. Victory or death.

'Here we go,' he allowed himself. One external manifestation of his feelings. No one heard.

Out in space, BLOCKADE 3 peeled away from its sisters. It dipped and began a circular ascent towards its proscribed coordinates. The attack was to be simultaneous to maximise surprise and to prevent defensive tactics. The pilot listened carefully to the computer calculations.

The other two ships were out of the moon's gravity. Their rear booster lights flashed and they increased speed. Eleven minutes to the target. Through their cockpit windows the pilots saw the rapidly looming Earth, criss-crossed with that unearthly glowing web. From here, it was clear that the strings of light were not so much being constructed as flickering into reality. Firming up, becoming clearer, like rising veins in a slapped arm. Now and then the glowing spot of a SILOET satellite crossed its lines.

Medical diagnostics monitoring the pilots' vital signs noted significant increases in heart rate, breath rapidity and perspiration. Training kept these autonomic reflexes down to a minimum.

'Arm Z-bombs,' came Adams's voice crackling through their headphones. Orange visors darkened to compensate for the increased light of the growing Earth. Pilots 1 and 2 flicked switches on their control panels.

Eight minutes later, BLOCKADE 1 and BLOCKADE 2 were within minimum range. The planet filled their vision entirely - a blue and grey living painting, scarred by the Myloki slashes across its canvas.

'Approaching target,' came a pilot's underwhelming comment on the sight. There was no waver in his voice. The computer began its countdown for projected energy build-up. BLOCKADE 1 moved out of formation towards the primary target coordinates. Both space ships twisted sideways, adjusting pitch to provide the most efficient angle of attack. The countdown ticked away.

Coordinates translated into digital images appeared on the cockpit displays. Red lines overlaid the Myloki originals. The radios fell silent, the only words now the relentless, emotionless intonations of the computer.

The seconds ticked away. Earth sat placidly beneath its tiny defenders. Something flashed in the Myloki mesh. A pulse, slowly building.

'I think we're on it,' said BLOCKADE 2.

'Commencing attack pattern now,' came the distant voice of 3.

Everyone was waiting for something to happen, for the Myloki to respond.

'Targets locked,' said BLOCKADE 1.

The computer counted down from twenty, to ten, to five... quicker than anyone expected.

Green lights winked on and the automatic launchers blasted the Z- bombs into space.

'We're away!'

The two BLOCKADES fired boosters and screamed round away from orbit. The Myloki pulse was definitely increasing. The bombs hit.

Bishop was out of his seat and running to the monitors. 'What is it? What the hell happened?'

The lunar camera facing Earth showed nothing. Too far away, thought Bishop. Of course it won't see anything.

Mission control was busy hailing its pilots. 'Report! Report!' Adams was facing his own bank of monitors.

'Blockade 3 reporting. We have an explosion on the lunar surface.'

Zoe yelled out, 'Lunar target positive hit!'

No sound, Bishop realised. 'Adams, get me a view on that!'

Troubled, Adams seemed to come to his senses. He snapped a switch, and the Lunar control image was replaced by a flare of whiteness, slowly diminishing into spreading dust.

'We got them!' shouted a technician.

Or, they weren't there any more, thought Bishop. 'What about the others? Get the link back!'

Adams returned to the monitor again. '- make any sense,' he was saying.

'Tom! What the hell?'

The lunar captain held up a hand for silence. 'BLOCKADE 1! Come in BLOCKADE 1!'

'No reported explosions in Earth orbit, Commander,' said Zoe.

A double distorted voice, the pilot. 'BLOCKADE 1 to Lunar Base. Did you get that?'

'Negative. That's a negative, BLOCKADE 1.'

The static hissed. 'I... they just faded out. What?'

Half a million miles away, Adams thumped his console. 'Say again. Faded out?'

'Don't know,' said BLOCKADE 1. 'Just went.'

They were taken, thought Bishop. They went through.

'One of the space ships has gone,' said Zoe. Her voice was flat. Resigned.

'BLOCKADE 1. Can you get a visual on BLOCKADE 2? We must have a tracking malfunction.' The radar technicians scabbled with their terminals.

'Negative Lunar Base,' said BLOCKADE 1. 'You mean he's gone? Where?'

'Swing around... swing around. BLOCKADE 2, report in. Report in!'

At last, a tremor of emotion in Adams's voice.

Bishop left his seat. They wouldn't find BLOCKADE 2. Somehow, it had gone wherever the bombs had gone. To them.

Well, he thought. We tried.

How hard we have tried.

XXI

The helicopter flew through the night sky, following the black line of the jungle river. The emptiness overhead shone its own eerie light, etching the trees below as if it had daubed them with luminous paint. The scenery was broken only by the hulking shadows of moss-covered mountains. Up on this high plateau, the air was thin and rarefied and the helicopter thumped and shuddered as it fought to stay level.

An hour passed, and slowly the sun drew a thickening red smudge across the eastern horizon. The network of Myloki lines pulsed faintly, as if waiting for the dawn.

Misty clouds formed around the mountain peaks surrounding the plateau. Rich moisture began to coat the SELOET twin-bladed helicopter. Inside, the Doctor was marvelling at the morning.

Another jungle, he accepted, but a thousand differences. He had his face pressed against the clouded glass, watching the sun come up. 'You know,' he said to the dozing Alex Storm, 'sometimes it can all be rather wonderful.'

His gaze lifted to the spinning web up above. 'That, however, is a very different kettle of fish. It's like scaffolding. Like it's holding up the sky.'

Storm knew what he was looking at. He didn't have to get up. 'Very poetic. What I want to know,' he muttered, 'is what it's all in aid of. What are they building?'

The Doctor looked up again. The bulbous lines looked rotten in their phosphorescence. 'I don't think they're building anything. I think it's *appearing*. Like...' he searched for something apposite, 'like a whale emerging through cloudy water'

'We still don't know why.'

The Doctor turned to him. 'Oh, I have an idea. And, I think, so do you. And so does Mr Bishop.'

‘What are you talking about?’

‘But we will persist in playing these silly games, won’t we?’

Storm yawned. ‘Only in your mind, Doctor.’

The Doctor shook his head and looked out of the window again. He admired the simplicity, the absolutes of the jungle; politics was too trying first thing in the morning.

The helicopter was over the headwaters of the Orinoco River, straddling the borders of Brazil and Venezuela, apparently. Names, stamped on to maps by humans, meaning nothing to the ancient tropical rain forest living below.

Storm had radioed in their findings to SKYHOME and this is where they had been sent, first via a SILOET courier aircraft and now this.

There had been business whilst the pair of them were in Barbados. SKYHOME confirmed what they were seeing. This strange manifestation that grew across the sky was global. Odd patches appeared, seemingly at random, then spread, linking up with other patches in an uncomfortably organic process. Yes, thought the Doctor. We are being given an insight. The first sight of something... not of this place.

The web was sending down bolts of energy to the surface, tickling fingers that scratched the planet (oh, he was in a most metaphorical mood this morning, wasn’t he?) and left something behind in their wake. An infection. The land or sea it touched went bad. Mmm, perhaps fingers weren’t such a bad image after all. A clumsy, unsighted hand shoved into an ants’ nest, feeling blindly for a dropped ring. A rather small dropped ring.

He spotted something down below.

‘Colonel. Look.’

The new tone in his voice caught Storm’s attention. The SILOET man stood and joined the Doctor at the side door.

Down below, a vast circle of rainforest had turned brown. ‘I think this place has been touched,’ said the Doctor. He stumbled back into the hold, grabbing webbing as the helicopter bounced. Fumbling with the coiled wires, he bellowed into a wall microphone, ‘Pilot! Take us lower!’

‘Now wait a minute,’ said Storm. ‘We’re running out of time.’

‘I want to see,’ the Doctor insisted.

The pilot took them down to the tree line. Carefully, he hovered the vehicle a metre or so over the spreading branches. The Doctor hauled the side door open for a closer look, attached by D-rings to the hull. The downdraft engulfed him and the uppermost trees in a howling gale.

Something had got into the jungle. Leaves and branches were swollen and malformed, as if infused with some blight that made them swell and bruise. Great timber trunks opened up and burst apart at odd angles, splitting and leaking discoloured sap.

The Doctor felt sorry for them. All those hundreds of years they had stood, survived fire and flood and logging and all the rest, to fall victim to this blight.

Something moved in a branch right below him. There was a snarl and he jumped as an animal leapt up at him out of the distended leaves. The Doctor caught a glimpse of a misshapen, gelatine limb and oddly distorted teeth. Storm caught his straps and yanked him back into the helicopter. The creature fell back weakly into the spongy mass. The Doctor heard it crashing through sodden branches, screaming in a strange gurgling agony.

‘That’s enough,’ Storm shouted. ‘Pilot. Let’s get going!’

The Doctor twirled on his webbing as the helicopter banked steeply ‘Oh my.’

‘What the hell was that?’ asked Storm.

‘Some kind of... monkey. Once.’

‘The blast. From the Myloki. It must have got caught in the blast.’

The Doctor shook his head. He looked up at the helicopter roof, as if he could see awesome clues coded in its riveted metal surface.

He stood up, determined. ‘Come on, Colonel,’ he ordered. ‘We can’t hang about here.’

Storm sighed. ‘That’s what I’ve been saying all along.’

‘Well then,’ the Doctor blustered. ‘I’m agreeing with you, aren’t I? Pilot! Best speed, if you please!’

The big, self-important grin on his face was wiped off when the helicopter jerked, causing him to fall flat on his check-trousered backside.

They landed a good two miles from the coordinates. The bare rock outcrop was the only landing field possible for miles.

Since London, the Doctor had travelled on a seaplane, a hovercraft, a jet and this helicopter. He was getting mighty tired of travelling. How he longed for the smooth and effortless rides of the TARDIS. Ahem. Well, relatively smooth and effortless. Most of the time. Ahem.

The pilot and co-pilot were prepping rucksacks for the Doctor and Storm’s walk into the jungle. The Doctor was trying on boots, wearing a disapproving expression on his lively face.

‘Look, they’re your size,’ snarled Storm. ‘Just wear them, will you?’

As if to prove his point, Storm stuffed a clip into his pistol and holstered the weapon. He began to unfold an unwieldy map.

The thick forest trees around the misty stump on which they had landed were alive with the sounds of animals.

Scared, thought the Doctor. Scared and running.

On every continent, every ocean, great sores were appearing on the planet’s surface. The Doctor wondered how quickly the one they had flown over was expanding. Whatever it was, it seemed to thrive on vegetation - leaving a pestilent gangrene in its wake.

‘I wonder,’ he said aloud, causing the crew to look up. ‘Do you think we damage them as much as they damage us?’

They looked at him, not for the first time, as if he were mad. ‘I mean,’ he continued, ‘we don’t know, do we?’

Storm pulled his rucksack over his bulky shoulders, testing the weight. ‘They’re attacking us aren’t they? We can’t even get near them.’

‘How do you know?’ asked the Doctor, utterly sincere. ‘If our human form of existence, and I include myself in that category for convenience, co-exists with theirs, how do we know that we aren’t unwittingly... damaging them? We could be impinging on them somehow. Our forms could be as vague and threatening to them as they are to us. They may interpret our everyday actions as some sort of attack. We might even be very deadly.’

‘There’s no point in that kind of speculation. They’re the enemy, and we have to stop them. Why even bother?’

‘Because I want to know why they have come,’ the Doctor replied. ‘To enter our plane of existence, well I should imagine it’s an extremely difficult trick to pull off. They haven’t come for the fun of it. Not because they wanted to, but because they had to.’

‘Where is this leading?’

The Doctor laced up his boots. He stood up and was already casting about for a suitable walking stick. ‘Into the jungle, Colonel Storm. Time’s a-wastin!’

* * *

The walk was steep, overgrown and wet. A fine rain kept them uncomfortably damp and the heat was stifling. Despite that, Storm seemed in fine spirits. Perhaps he just thrived in unpleasant places rather than pleasant ones, thought the Doctor.

He had tied his handkerchief around his head and he couldn’t tell whether it was rain that soaked it or his own perspiration.

‘Tell me about the fellow,’ he asked, tapping Storm on the shoulder.

‘What fellow?’

‘The John Sharon fellow.’

Storm was wearing a wide-brimmed jungle hat, which rattled when the big drops from the trees splattered on to it. The Doctor spotted a spider the size of his face and decided to stick close to the big man.

‘Never met him,’ Storm said after a while. ‘But they were one of the most powerful families in history. Everyone knew about them. Even me in my Polish prison.’

The Doctor found this surprising. ‘I thought they were supposed to be anonymous.’

‘Well,’ said Storm, stopping to take his bearings. It was like a sauna in this jungle. ‘You knew *of* them - that they were a family - even if you didn’t know their names.’

‘Because of these engines they built?’ asked the Doctor. ‘Nuclear fusion compressors.’

‘Not really. That just sort of got slipped in. I think everyone just liked them because they were nice and did good things in cool vehicles.’

‘What was it they were called again?’ asked the Doctor. ‘Global Aid?’

‘Global Response. The word was: you shout for help and the next thing you know two rockets are landing in your garden. “Lightnings Strike!” Kids loved them.’

They were off again, and walking. At last, downhill. Except, ah, now it was dark and gloomy, deep in the trees. The Doctor grimaced.

‘So what happened?’ he asked to take his mind off the unpleasantness.

‘PRISM did,’ said Storm. ‘Took them over. Found out who they were. Wasn’t difficult - there weren’t that many stupidly rich families capable of building massive nuclear fusion flying rescue vehicles. Although the Sharons covered their tracks pretty well.’

‘Who were they then?’

‘Buck Sharon was a Texan engineering tycoon. Pretty much cornered the market in aerospace hardware. Five sons, all nowhere to be found. You do the math.’

The Doctor winced. ‘Sorry, but do you mind not using expressions like that? Just a little... you know... Go on.’

‘Not much else to say.’ A whole forest of thick ferns stopped them in their tracks. Storm dragged out his machete and began to hack.

‘John Sharon. Which one was he?’ asked the Doctor.

'The youngest. Spent a lot of time on their ComSat. Lightning 5, I think. Everyone thought it was a TV transmitter until PRISM used it to track them down. I don't really know what happened when they got taken over. I suppose they dropped out of sight. We had stolen their thunder. The Dad certainly took it hard.'

'Why do you say that?' asked the Doctor.

'He shot himself.'

'Oh.'

They walked in silence for a while, crunching the sap-dripping ferns underfoot. The Doctor tried to make sense of this information. Eventually, he asked the inevitable question. 'So where does Matthews fit in?'

All around them, small men wearing loincloths and strange face-paint appeared as if from the trees. Some clutched spears, others held blow-guns to their lips. All the weapons were pointed at Storm and the Doctor. About twenty in all, copper skin and large muscles. Squat and tough.

The Doctor put his hands on his head in immediate surrender. 'Hello!' he tried, without much hope.

The men did not move, just held their weapons still. Now he saw them closely, he realised that they all wore strange looking hats, of a type he had never seen before.

'I say...' he began and involuntarily pointed at one. He shut up immediately as the group hissed at him. The errant hand returned to his head.

Yes, very strange hats: woven from reeds and dyed green. Each was shaped like a bulbous bird with stubby wings. The beak was wide and almost seemed to be smiling.

One of the men turned and barked a command. The Doctor saw what was daubed in red dye on the side of his bird hat. It was a number: 2.

'You know what that is, don't you?' said Storm.

* * *

The tribe led the pair along an invisible path, invisible to the Doctor at least, until finally climbing up to the lip of a rugged outcrop of rock. The rain had picked up again, warm as blood.

The natives seemed intrigued by the interlopers, and also felt no shyness about tugging at their clothes and rucksacks. They stared up into their faces before braying with laughter, baring their yellowing teeth aggressively as if trying to scare them. Despite that last aspect, the Doctor felt no hostility from the jungle dwellers, more like they were children playing a rough game. In fact, he decided, I've rather taken to them.

He hauled himself over the final ridge, trying to keep pace with the men and now women leaping around him. As he straightened up, he surprised a pair of brightly plumed parrots who squawked and fluttered skyward in an untidy mass of scattered feathers. As they flew away, the Doctor realised he could hear something. A sound utterly at odds with this lush environment. Music.

Strings, and a deep resonant voice, very sad.

Storm laughed in disbelief. 'Scott Walker...'

The Doctor looked down into the sheltered green valley spread out below.

'Oh my,' he said.

In the centre he saw a large pool, a natural lake fed by a gigantic crashing waterfall. At its circumference, sheer cliffs rose from the ground, like the valley was a huge crater.

The pool area had been cleared and a collection of stilted wooden huts raised up out of the mud. However, none of this was the reason for his utterance.

The huts were clustered around what looked like a gigantic broken-backed bird. A man-made bird. Its green casing had faded and its angular eyes were hollowed and dark. The Doctor saw shards of cockpit glass still clinging to the sills. The head, wings and tail were raised up on four spindly, telescopic legs, discoloured, rusted and wreathed in luxuriant jungle vines. It seemed the bird's stomach had dropped down to the ground and hollowed out. A huge cargo container. The door had dropped open to reveal a cavernous interior. He was too high to see inside, but an orange glow gave away the presence of a fire within. Stencilled on the stubby wings, in peeling red paint, was the number 2. Jungle rain cascaded off the fuselage in sheets, a pale imitation of the real

thundering waterfall. And from somewhere, the sound of music. This 'Scott Walker'.

The Doctor turned to Storm. 'Is this - ?'

Storm nodded, almost allowing 'being impressed' to show on his face. 'So it came down here,' said the Colonel. 'The last flight of Lightning 2. We always wondered.'

One of the tribesmen raised a spear and yelled down into the valley. His call was answered by a series of similar musical yells. The Doctor felt a spear shoved in his back, pushing him forward. 'Careful,' he turned and smiled at his assailant. 'We have come to help, you know.'

There was a log path to help their descent. The air was less humid down here and the temperature dropped. It was a welcome relief.

Once inside the village, the Doctor could see that there had been some technological hand involved in building it. Many of the huts were decorated with wires and computer hardware, presumably scavenged from the downed aircraft. A heat cell, powered by a fusion generator, had been set up in a cleared circle and was currently roasting some kind of pig-like carcass. Naked children played with communication decks and decaying transistorised circuit boards. They looked up when the Doctor and Storm passed by, howling with excitement.

Their little party was gesturing them towards the open bowels of the cargo container. The music gained substance as they walked towards it. Storm was eyeing the natives around him with suspicion. 'Maybe they think they've found lunch,' he said.

'Now, now Colonel,' the Doctor replied. 'They seem like splendid fellows.' Although, if memory served, this tribe could be the Yanomamo, and contrary to his optimism, they could be a very fierce bunch indeed.

There was a new smell as they approached. A familiar pungent odour that seemed oddly out of place. Antiseptic. That clinic smell again. Scott Walker was singing about a boy child.

The glow they had seen from above turned out to be torches lining the interior of the container. The Doctor heard the sound of moaning voices over the music. It seemed the place was a hospital after all. But so many voices? He began to understand.

The sickness was. here too.

He caught a glimpse of the lip of the container. The gloomy interior was writhing with bodies - tribesmen like those outside, but malformed, distended.

'God,' hissed Storm and turned away. Underneath that antiseptic there was a thick, creamy stench. The Doctor moved to walk inside, but instantly three men barred his way, growling and thrusting their little spears. He raised his hands to show he didn't mean any harm.

'Dammit, where's that light?' shouted an old American voice from the interior. 'Is that you, Abercrombie?'

The Doctor cleared his throat. 'Actually, no. It's us.'

The moaning stopped, and the music flicked off. 'What the hell?'

A man emerged into the light. A very old, very tired looking man. A pale, stocky Scandinavian physiology that had been leathered and tenderised by years of jungle sun and heat, with thinning hair and beard a matted grey. Blue eyes were ingrained with rings of exhaustion.

The man wore a simple green safari jacket and shredded shorts. A frayed stethoscope hung loosely round his neck. He wore plastic surgical gloves crusted with red and yellow matter. He blinked as he emerged into the daylight.

The sight of the Doctor and Storm seemed to throw him. He looked winded, as if hit. 'Who... Who are you?' he stammered.

'I am the Doctor and this is Colonel Storm. We've come to help. John Sharon?'

Sharon nodded, bewildered, and the Doctor thought of battle fatigue. 'I guess you've come about this blight that's hit the jungle?' he said at last, clearly trying to sound detached.

'In a manner of speaking,' the Doctor replied. 'Shall we take a peek?'

‘Not me,’ said Storm, suddenly. ‘I’m not going in there.’ To emphasise his point, he walked back towards the huts.

Well, thought the Doctor, everyone has his breaking point. For the first time, he wondered just how resilient Alex Storm actually was beneath his taciturn, unemotional exterior.

Mind you, he thought, one could hardly blame him. Sharon must have been living with this for days now. The stench from the container was beyond belief.

‘I warn you,’ said John Sharon. ‘It isn’t pleasant.’

Hours later, he emerged. Even he was pale. The deformities, the distorted limbs swollen to giant proportions, the poisonous liquids to be drained, the sheer scale was heartbreaking. Those affected knew exactly what was happening to them. Death was a relief. It was mostly a question of making them comfortable whilst waiting for the drugs to bring them welcome oblivion.

As suspected, these victims had been caught in an alien blast. It had touched the jungle two nights before. Since then, there had been a steady stream of refugees heading into the valley.

Hours later, John Sharon was drinking coffee as the trio sat round a fire. A dry evening was setting in. The Doctor gazed into the fire, trying to get the sight of the flames to burn out the images he had just witnessed.

Sharon revealed he had been working without sleep since the strike. He was twitchy and deeply upset, almost ashamed that he couldn’t do any more for these adopted people of his. The Doctor liked him. Like Doctor Piper, a good man in an impossible situation.

‘I don’t understand the nature of this sickness,’ said Sharon, clearly relieved to have someone to talk to who might have an answer to his predicament. And the strange shapes they had been seeing in the sky whenever the clouds cleared.

Sharon had only been mildly deflated when the Doctor explained that he and Storm weren’t the vanguard of some UN medical team. He was worse when told that these strikes were taking place all over the world. In fact, explained the

Doctor, Sharon was probably doing more than almost anybody else to treat its effects.

‘What is it?’ Sharon asked. ‘Some kind of pollution? A chemical disaster?’

The Doctor stared into the fire. Ideas were forming in his mind. He tried to relax, let them come through. Storm yawned.

‘A force,’ the Doctor spoke at last. ‘An energy from a different place - a place so alien, so different, that when it comes here, it spoils what it touches. It leaves behind some sort of residue. More subtle than that. It poisons.’

‘What are you talking about, Doctor?’ Storm’s voice revealed he was getting fed up with being the one who asked all the questions.

The Doctor ignored him. Instead he spoke to John Sharon. ‘Its touch is so toxic to our... dimension, our plane of reality, it creates a cancer. A cancer that consumes, devouring its host. I think what we’re seeing here is what happens when our world and their world... intertwine.’

* * *

Throughout the night, the Doctor helped John Sharon do what he could for the incoming trickle of affected tribespeople. Storm paced around the valley pool, becoming less and less patient. In his opinion this was all a waste of time. They needed to get the information and leave. The Doctor suspected he would soon become more forceful in his voicing of this opinion.

Storm didn’t understand. They needed the breathing space. The Doctor needed time to think. Also, there was something about Sharon that he found... admirable. To plonk himself here in this jungle and dedicate himself to the kind of aid and backbreaking work that he put himself through, well, the Doctor found that prodded at the selfish and wandering motives within his own psyche. He himself was a gadabout, a quick fixer, who never had to deal with the consequences of his actions. He didn’t like ‘maintenance’ tasks - which probably accounted for the haphazard state of the TARDIS.

As he tinkered with the fusion generator, aware of Sharon's discomfited gaze as he did so, he took some time to try and get a better picture of this dedicated, rather sad man. He stood back and turned the start key. After a couple of coughs and hacks, the machine shuddered into life, and at last fresh air began to waft into the cargo container.

There was also that nagging feeling that somehow there was still something waiting to be unearthed, one more puzzle to be solved before he could be sure of what he suspected.

'Tell me about Captain Matthews,' he said, as they connected yet another patient up to an IV that would fail to save his life.

Sharon looked up at the Doctor over the rims of his thin spectacles. 'What do you want to know?'

'He came to you, didn't he? Once the book revelations came out. I'm interested to know why he would do that.'

Sharon bent over to allow one of the little Yanomamo to mop his brow. 'Thank you Abercrombie,' he said. The tribesman stepped politely away.

'Abercrombie?' asked the Doctor.

'I call him Abercrombie. After an old British guy in the organisation. A butler.' Sharon regarded the Doctor with amusement. 'All right, I'll show you.'

He threw the Doctor a towel to wipe his hands, then stomped out of the cargo container. The Doctor peeled off his surgical gloves and gown, and chased after him. The night air tasted good after that fetid box. Storm turned eagerly from his lakeside mooching. The Doctor wagged a finger. Stay back, he willed, just a little longer.

'Grant Matthews,' said Sharon. 'I take it you know the story of the Wandering Jew?'

The Doctor was cautious. He had detected something in the voice that made him uncomfortable all of a sudden. Like he had something to prove. 'I have heard it mentioned,' the Doctor replied.

'The Jew was cursed by God to eternal life, abandoned to wander the world until he found salvation.'

'You see parallels between this story and Matthews?' asked the Doctor, deliberately obtuse.

'I would have thought that was obvious,' Sharon replied. Touché, thought the Doctor.

Sharon was leading him under the shadow of the giant aircraft. The effect of the jungle upon the vehicle was much more apparent here. Vines and creepers were wrapped tightly around the telescopic support legs in a great profusion. Insects were swarming over its sides and the fatal effects of rust were spreading. Crude paint markings had been swabbed everywhere, in some arcane gesture. It was as if Lightning 2 was being offered up to the rainforest, a tribute from the technological world. For the first time, the Doctor wondered whether John Sharon was entirely sane.

The man himself, in sprightly shape for someone who must have been over sixty, hauled on an old hydraulics cable to release a crude vine ladder that unrolled down from the cockpit. The machine was large enough to have its own unique engine smell. The Doctor felt its mechanical presence, bulky and clumsy. Perhaps that was why Sharon was returning it to the jungle. In a way, this whole Eden seemed to externalise some psychological game. There was nature here, but a desire to control too. Perhaps to unravel the man, you needed to understand the place.

'Are you a religious man, Mr Sharon?' asked the Doctor as he swarmed up the ladder after him. 'You'll see,' came the reply.

The climb was surprisingly difficult. The vine was knotty and splintered.

Sharon helped the Doctor over the lip of the damaged pressure hatch that led into the beak-like cockpit. 'Thank you.' The cockpit itself was surprisingly roomy, and bare of all technology but the pilot's seat. Sharon, or more likely his acolytes, had stripped the place. There was little here but broken windows, a camp bed, candles and a dust sheet draped across the rear wall.

'Dad was a Christian. When the UN declared Earth a secular planet he was furious. Refused to give up his beliefs.'

Sharon was on edge, fussing around the dusty area, picking up bits of twig and leaf that had blown in through the window sockets.

‘And what were those beliefs?’ asked the Doctor, staying deliberately still.

‘Oh, you know...’ Sharon muttered, ‘the usual. Resurrection, new life, salvation, that kind of thing. He was very kind. There was nothing but good in him. He believed that good deeds were the key to forgiveness.’

‘Forgiveness for what?’

Sharon looked at him, unable to believe he didn’t understand. ‘For our sins, Doctor. We’re all sinners. From the womb. It’s what we do about it that guarantees salvation.’

‘You do a wonderful job here, you know,’ said the Doctor. ‘I doubt many men would be strong enough.’

‘Strong? No, no. I’m weak, Doctor. Always was. That was why...’

The Doctor noticed Sharon’s eyes stray to the dust sheet. Just what was he keeping under there?

‘Tell me about your time with, er ... Global Response, was it? Weren’t you the one in space? Sounds jolly important.’

Sharon sat in the seat. He swivelled nervously and bit on his nails. The Doctor felt sorry for him, tried to imagine his life. John Sharon was a normal man - not particularly clever, nor talented. Just normal. He would have been a naturally good-humoured, gregarious child. Someone you just liked to be around. One of the guys, as the Americans probably put it.

‘No,’ said Sharon. ‘Not really important. Dad...’ his voice quavered a little. ‘I wasn’t a natural leader like Skip, or clever like Homer. You know, as the youngest, the other guys would rib me a little. My brothers were great, the best, and they all did nothing but good.’

At last, as if reading the Doctor’s mind, John Sharon walked across the bare cockpit floor and pulled away the dust sheet.

Five photographs, portrait sized and neatly framed, were lined up along the wall. All were men, all resembled each

other, and all but one wore a purple uniform with a diagonal blue sash. None of the faces had eyes - just blanks cut out from the canvas. The men stared sightlessly out from their pictures. The Doctor coughed, to cover up his shock.

'Your family?' he asked.

John Sharon nodded. 'Global Response. The world shall not see their like again.'

The person out of uniform was an older man, grey-haired, sun-tanned and tough. 'Your father?' said the Doctor.

'Buck Sharon,' John replied. 'A great, great man.' He pointed along the row. 'Skip, Homer, Alton, Graham. Lightnings Strike!'

'What about you?' asked the Doctor. 'What about your portrait?'

Sharon smiled. His eyes were moist and filled with love. 'Oh, I'm hardly... you know, I'm not... you know... fit...'

The Doctor decided he had to get tough. Whatever was wrong with John Sharon, whatever psychic drama that went on up there, for good or bad he seemed desperate for the Doctor to understand. 'So you think you were put up in space to, what, get you out of the way?' asked the Doctor. 'I don't believe that.' He was touching a nerve here, he knew. But it seemed to be a nerve that Sharon himself wanted prodding.

'No, no,' Sharon insisted. 'Lightning 5 was the newest model in the organisation - a global Comsat. Someone had to man it, and the other guys had their roles already, so I was naturally, y'know...'

Sharon seemed to be getting younger, lost in his thoughts. The Doctor realised he was probably the first non-tribesperson he had seen in years. Apart from Matthews of course. As he looked at Sharon, the bearded medic seemed to dissipate in favour of the image of a young, blonde teenager.

He stared at his father's blank face. 'He sent me there as a lesson. I'd done some bad stuff, you know. Ran a little wild for a while. Teenage stuff. I'd let the side down. Let the *guys* down. So he sent me up there. It was an honour, really. I'm glad I went. And you know, there's more. Because I heard

things out there and I think it might have been them: the aliens. I think I heard their voices. And it's too bad, because you know I think we messed up. When they sang, I could hear angels. If we hadn't attacked them, stirred them up, I think something marvellous could have... and I think Dad knew that. He knew that he could put me near them and I could learn and make up for my mistakes. I was a bad kid. And children like that must be punished as well as praised, don't you think?' He looked at the Doctor, eyes shining.

'What happened with Matthews?' asked the Doctor. Stay neutral. Stay out.

Sharon looked at the portraits propped up against the wall. Buck Sharon's empty eyes glared back. 'Captain Matthews came to us for help. Dad... Dad couldn't refuse. Never could. Nothing but love in him. But he, he wasn't happy about it. No way.'

'Why not?'

Sharon looked at the Doctor. Yes, the little boy was still there all right. He had never gone away. 'He didn't like being... He'd hated PRISM from the off and what they had done with our inventions. Him and Boffin had built GR up from the ground, in secret.'

'Boffin?' asked the Doctor.

'Professor Dwight Graham,' said Sharon. 'Dad's scientific partner. We called him Boffin because he was so clever. With mechanics and that. Invented the Lightnings. Sold us out and went to PRISM. Let Dad down. Let the family down.'

Sharon went mournful and silent. The resentment was palpable. The Doctor waited for the story to resume. He didn't want to interrupt any more.

'Grant kinda brought that all home. But Dad couldn't refuse someone asking for sanctuary. And I guess we were the only people he could relate to. The whole world wanted to tear Grant limb from limb. I liked him. He was... sad. Didn't seem to fit. Placed on the Earth to wander, friendless and alone. In fact, I was probably his last friend.'

'What did your Dad think about that?'

Sharon stood up. 'Oh, he killed himself.'

He paused, perhaps remembering. The Doctor waited. 'I think Dad thought everything he had done had become... obsolete. That Matthews made him feel... superseded. I think the blow to his pride is what finished him off. But he was a good man. A saint. The world is poorer for his absence.'

Sharon was inspecting the portraits, nodding at them as if seeking their approval. The guilt that drove John Sharon, the determination that had saved hundreds of lives but ruined his own, was writ large on his face.

'You said his last friend?' asked the Doctor. 'Does that mean you know where Matthews is?'

'Of course,' said John Sharon. 'He's on Sharon Island. Where else do you think he would be?'

'You find out?' asked Storm.

The Doctor nodded. He stomped up the cliff path, determined. 'We'd better go. Arrange a pick-up as soon as possible. Let's end this.'

Storm looked up at the cockpit. 'So, what he lives up there or something?' He was fiddling with his rucksack, trying to swing it round his shoulders whilst following along. 'Something,' replied the Doctor and kept on walking. He didn't feel the need to mention the knife slashes and bullet holes driven into the blind Sharon family portraits.

XXII

As soon as the night shift began, Zoe went up to check out the discrepancies she had found in the computer. Something on SKYHOME was using up a disproportionate amount of power and she was determined to find out what it was.

There was the other reason, of course. She had managed to stifle her shock at returning to the base hangar and finding the TARDIS gone, but shock it still was.

Some covert but thorough digital searching later, she soon realised that if it was still on SKYHOME it could only be on the upper levels, along with whatever was eating up the power.

As in a submarine, the lighting was reduced at night. They didn't quite go the whole hog and turn everything red, which Zoe was grateful for, but it was quite dark enough for her purposes.

The routine had helped her, like it always had. As in the City, with Mark. But you couldn't hide behind routine forever. On the Wheel, she knew she had used routine to cover her insecurities, her fear. She found comfort in routine. This was a habit she was about to overcome. If she was to learn anything from her time with the Doctor, if their travels had any meaning at all, it was the importance of liberating herself from routine.

The time had come to break the rules. The Doctor would expect nothing less.

Afraid to use the now-functioning anti-gravity tubes, Zoe located the hatch to the emergency ladder and, after taking a peek around, typed in the code on the key-seal. The door hissed open, smart and efficient. She squeezed herself into the cramped emergency tube and pulled her sketched map from her silver boots.

The higher levels were supposed to be disused. She would see.

Zoe began to climb. Her heart was fluttering. If Bishop caught her, God knows what he would do.

Bishop.

It wasn't fair. She had been brought up to believe that there was a strict right and a strict wrong and the two were quite distinct. The just would be rewarded for their actions, that had to be so. It wasn't a religious belief or anything, it was a practical positive life choice.

Only now, there were no longer these certainties. The variables weren't concrete - not like the comforting truth of numbers. She had loved a man called Mark. A man who had asked her to marry him. He had made her feel... had tapped into emotions she had always felt had been missed out in her genetic make-up.

Yet Mark had been a slaver. With the power to punish, even kill those who displeased him. Perhaps he never would have abused that power, but who could be sure? And what would *she* have become?

Anyway, none of that mattered, because Bishop had killed Mark, no matter how indirectly or by whatever proxy he might use as his weapon.

And now, where there should be a nice double-lined equals sign that wrapped everything up, there was only this: she was helping the man who had killed her man. Even more, his whole organisation depended on her. Where was the equation? How did it balance?

Because if she didn't help then the Earth was dead. The aliens would destroy the planet. And SILOET was all that stood in their way. It couldn't get more messy.

All Zoe could think of to cope was the fact that there was one absolute in her life - the factor that balanced the equation, that *made sense* of it all. That factor was why she was now climbing this ladder in a tiny maintenance tube in the middle of SKYHOME. *She* couldn't figure it out, but someone else could. He brought stability and calm to whatever he touched. The Doctor factor. The Doctor.

Or perhaps it was just that she wasn't going to lie down and roll over for Bishop any more. Maybe she was getting tired of doing what she was told. Perhaps she simply wanted to... pee him off.

Zoe missed Jamie.

The rungs were getting slippery now - the heat exchangers were sending air up the tube and the temperature had risen alarmingly. She hadn't accounted for this on her little map. The heat pressed in on her like a hand pressing into her skull. Breathing was becoming difficult. Overhead, far up in the gloom, a fan whirled uselessly. Her arms were getting heavy, over and over and up and up the rungs, one after the other. The wig was a nightmare. She pulled the purple monstrosity from her head and dropped it down the shaft. Good riddance. Perhaps it would drop through an exhaust vent and fall all the way to the Earth. Perhaps it would land on some peasant's head and he'd think he was being brain-drained by a purple alien invader.

Zoe giggled, this kind of thought wasn't normal. The heat was making her light-headed. She had better come out... come out of the tube.

Next hatch up. Was that the top level? She couldn't remember.

Her fingers slipped away from the rung and Zoe toppled. Her other hand gripped instinctively and she swung on one arm, bouncing off the thick wall. Her muscles wrenched with the effort and she screamed. Scrabbling a hold, she clung to the ladder. There was no air in here. She had to get out. Climb down. Climb down. Easy.

But she couldn't. She was light-headed - heat and lack of oxygen seemed to shove wedges of cotton wool in the neural space between brain and limb. She had to grip, force herself to keep a hold of the rungs or her numb, sweaty fingers might just decide to let go. Absurd, the diminishing logical segment of her brain was telling. Climbing down was easy, as easy as falling...

Finding the strength, Zoe scrambled upwards to the hatch. Otherwise she was going to drop. Black spots in her eyes were telling her that the air had run out.

She shuffled on to the tiny ledge and realised she couldn't see a handle. She couldn't get the door open.

Time passed as she waited to slip. She had pounded on the hatch and shouted for help, but no one had come. No one was going to. The heat was sapping her strength and all she could do was wait until she couldn't cling on any more. Darkness crouched beneath, waiting to catch her.

She tried the hatch one more time, knowing she was managing nothing but wasting energy. Her suffocated brain told her to grip, to hold on but this was it, the end. She prepared herself for the plummet.

The hatch slid open. Something like ice came like a wave at her. Fresh air, the freshest she had ever known.

Someone was pulling her out of the tube, lowering her to a cold metal floor. Zoe curled up, shivering. Her fingers and hands were agony, smeared with her own perspiration.

'OO-Oh my!' said a voice.

Zoe looked up, still drinking in that cool, life-saving air.

The man who stood over her looked like the stereotypical mad scientist. Two huge eyes, magnified by impossibly thick-rimmed spectacles, stared wide and unblinking at her. Unwieldy white hair grew at random from the shining head and, yes, he wore a white coat.

'Thank... Thank you,' she said, aware that she had, to all intents and purposes, done little more than make a fool of herself.

Still that unblinking, fish-eyed grin. He's studying me, Zoe thought, like he's never seen a woman before.

'W-W-Well I never!' the scientist exclaimed, apparently utterly thrown by her appearance.

She raised a goose-bumped arm. 'Help me up?' she asked. The big eyes blinked and he took a step back. 'Please?'

The scientist shook his head, as if he didn't believe he wasn't dreaming, then made up his mind. He made a tentative grab at her hand and hauled her to her feet.

Zoe was definitely in a laboratory. Squeezed into a compact little compartment, but still a laboratory.

There was a blue police box tucked into one corner.

Zoe found out one thing about 'Boffin' very quickly: he liked his herbal infusions. He kept a neatly labelled collection of teas in little tupperware containers and had everything from camomile to cha to blackcurrant to cinnamon. Green ginger and peppermint. In fact the scientist would probably have been able to whisk up a mean oak leaf and piranha if she'd asked. He was a nice contrast to the alcoholic tobacco addicts down below. Probably why he looked so young for a man of seventy, as he had proudly announced.

'YY-You know, you really sh-shouldn't be here,' said Boffin, stirring his brew with what looked like a very delicate electronic sensor. A gleaming teaspoon sat untouched next to him on his workbench. Zoe tried not to laugh.

She then realised that actually it wouldn't make any difference whether she laughed out loud or not. Boffin lived in a world of his own.

'Although I don't suppose it m-matters now,' he said. 'You're hardly going to be a spy. Anyway, it's nice to have someone to talk to. You must be the famous Zoe. H-Hal keeps talking about you.'

'How long have you been here?' Zoe interrupted. 'Why don't we ever see you?'

Boffin stopped stirring. He stared at his mug, as if suddenly aware of the imbalance between appropriate cutlery and liquid, yet failing to isolate the mistake. 'Not long,' he replied. 'I was brought here when you were. You know, you're the first woman I've seen for ten years.'

'Ten years?' Zoe was incredulous.

Ten years. Y-Yes, I think so,' he said. 'It was November when w-we... no, it m-must have b-been July... You know

you should really be wearing your wig. The air conditioning here seems to be -'

'All on your own? Just you?'

Boffin gave up on the whole tea/cutlery experiment. He placed the mug on the workbench, eyeing it with suspicion.

'Commander Bishop and I. Yes.'

Zoe scanned the laboratory. 'What is it you do here, exactly?'

Boffin inclined his head, suddenly spotting the teaspoon. He picked it up and glared at it. 'Oh, I b-build things.'

He certainly did. The laboratory was a mass of technology, big and small. The most powerful computers Zoe had seen since they had arrived were cabled up to massive metal containers, swarming with flashing lights, rolling tape spools and clicking countdowns. Overhead, transistorised boards the size of her hand rolled along on smooth conveyer belts, robot arms extended to complete circuits and flick switches. There seemed to be a thousand experiments, all bodedged together. Along with the tea.

'And what is it you're building?' she asked.

He stood up and shuffled across the floor. He waved a loose arm, indicating the clanking machinery. 'I had t-to leave most of my equipment down on Earth...' He stopped short in front of the TARDIS. He inspected it. 'Th-There's more to this than meets the eye,' he stated, tapping the blue box with his spoon. 'Anyway, let me show you around...'

Zoe had an instinct that whatever explanation he gave would be long, detailed and incredibly technical. Time to step in.

'You're using a lot of power. A quarter of all the power on the station.'

Boffin shrugged. Zoe recognised the gesture - she had used it herself on many occasions. It was the shrug of the genius loner, the outsider prodigy, asked to explain him or her self. A mixture of embarrassment and pride. Arrogance and self-effacement.

'I have to have it,' he said. 'I n-need it the most. My work is the most important.'

Where did that come from? Chronic shyness coupled with obsessive attention to inorganic detail. A retreat from human contact.

Zoe blushed. She began to understand something. About Zoe.

This could have been her. So easily, it could have been her, voluntarily hidden away in a Parapsychology Library, forgotten by everyone else. Chiselling away at little projects of her own. No distractions, no bothersome people.

Once she would have found that a very attractive prospect. Why so frightening now?

‘What work is that?’ she asked, aware of the flutter in her voice.

Boffin had spotted a dial he found disfavour with and was tapping it impatiently. ‘Cell self-eradication, mostly. Genetic reduction, cannibalistic DNA chains, that kind of thing. And a method of delivery... come here!’

Zoe jumped, but realised that he was talking to the dial.

‘Why aren’t you reading 8.23 you 1-little...’ He tapped again and seemed happier with the results.

‘What for? Why is that so important?’

For the first time, she realised she had his full attention. She had bothered him.

‘Isn’t it o-o-obvious?’ he snapped. The fish eyes were on her again. ‘To beat the Myloki.’

Zoe prodded a clanking mechanical thingy. ‘Please don’t touch that,’ said Boffin, who began leading her away, as if she had stolen something.

‘Sounds fascinating,’ she replied. ‘Do you think you’ll manage it? Find a way to beat them?’

Boffin smiled. ‘Oh no. The Myloki are invincible.’

Again, she forced herself not to be shocked. ‘Really?’

‘Oh yes. Commander Bishop may not think so, but I know. It’s Darwinism you see. Pure and simple. They are exponentially more intelligent than the human race; the two races are inimical and entirely incapable of coexistence. Therefore, the human race will be superseded by the more efficient organism. It’s not rocket science.’

He was off working on the dial again, now he had convinced himself she wasn't going to ruin anything.

'Then why do you bother?' asked Zoe. This was too much. She didn't know what to make of it. 'I mean, if the whole thing is hopeless?'

Boffin looked at her as if he thought she might be making a joke. 'Science! The opportunity to better ourselves as a species. Surely nothing is more important than that? There's no point in becoming emotional. It happens all the time, in nature I mean. For myself, I would like to think that I might leave something behind for them, some legacy. Just to show them... what we were once capable of.'

He was manifesting something like emotion, Zoe realised. As best as he understood it. She guessed she was supposed to feel privileged by his candour.

'Tell me about these experiments then. These DNA eradicator machines.'

'Oh th-there's only one working model.'

'Can I see it?'

'No. It's out in the field. Shame really. There were some modifications I could have...'

'What is it supposed to do? What DNA did you want to eradicate?'

She had a horrible thought.

'I think that's enough explanations, don't you?' came a new, smooth voice. Bishop. Smart, controlled. Just the same.

He walked into the laboratory. 'Really Professor Graham. This was supposed to be our little secret.'

Boffin was blushing bright red. 'I kn-know. But she just seemed so nice. And you're always telling me how clever she is. I thought she w-would understand.'

Bishop shook his head. 'Zoe, I need your help. The strikes on the planet's surface are increasing. I'm worried that SKYHOME itself might be caught in one of them. I'd like you to help calculate a course to avoid -'

'You're going to destroy him, aren't you?' she snapped. 'Matthews. You want the Doctor to find him so you can kill him. Then you'll kill the Doctor.'

She was so angry she felt herself losing control. And for once, she liked it. Anger was necessary. She strode up to Bishop. At last, she had found a kind of answer to the questions she had asked herself in the emergency tube.

She knew she was going to shout; she felt hot. 'You're so sure of yourself and you don't care who you tread on. You just don't care. You probably don't even care about the Myloki. You just want... what you want.' She couldn't stop now even if she felt like it. 'You... you're evil. And your plan will fail. You're evil. And you'll lose.'

Over. She stood and panted, staring him right in the eyes.

Bishop grabbed Zoe round the neck. Veins stood out on his forehead. He wrapped fingers round her jaw and inclined her head up to look at him.

Time ticked by. The grip was tight, but she wasn't going to turn away from him. She wasn't going to back down.

For a confusing moment, as she looked into his blue eyes, Zoe had the oddest feeling that Bishop was going to kiss her. Why did she feel that?

At last, his grip loosened, just slightly. 'Get down to the Security Centre,' he said. Voice calm and modulated.

'Never!' she snapped back, with an intensity she didn't quite understand.

The hands round her hands dropped away. 'Get down there...' he said softly. 'Or I'll have you shot.'

Zoe pulled herself upright. 'What? What did you say?'

Bishop had walked away and was already smoothing down his uniform. Only a slight colour in the cheekbones betrayed any emotion. He was under control again. For him that was a tantrum.

'I mean it.'

All at once, she was afraid of him.

'C-Commander,' Boffin stammered. 'This is - '

'I want you too, "Professor",' Bishop interrupted. 'And bring your toys.'

Boffin stared at the laboratory around him, as if he suddenly found his lair an alien place. 'Commander,' he said.

“This must be a scientific operation. Or - or - or...” he couldn’t articulate the words.

Zoe rubbed her bruised neck, tears stinging her eyes. Keep them inside, she forced herself. Don’t give him the pleasure.

‘We must remain calm,’ Boffin was going on. ‘Logical.’

Bishop turned on Boffin and smiled. The scientist cringed. Bishop spoke softly. ‘Storm has succeeded.’ He looked directly at Zoe. ‘We’ve found him.’

PART SIX

XXIII

He broke through the waves, up into the warm air. Around him, petals of spray blossomed across the smooth water. He splashed down again, rolling over and floating in the blood-warm sea. He waited for his pounding heart to regulate itself.

Seven minutes underwater. He was getting better.

The arcane patterns in the sky had solidified. They were like fine strands of silver stitched over a blue blanket. Unreadable symbols of a fantastically arcane language. As the lines strengthened, they seemed to him more and more like the bars of a cage, trapping the Earth inside.

He turned, mood ruined by the sight, and swam a fast crawl to the white beach. Naked, he emerged from the water and jogged towards his home. At his back, the waves lapped their eternal tongues against the sand.

No, he corrected himself. Not eternal. Not even the waves.

A familiar image in his mind. An ancient stone cathedral. A metaphorical image of... what? Nostalgia? Security? Something bound up with his childhood. Winchester, a million years ago.

He recalled thinking of the cathedral some time in his past, but couldn't remember when. Why did it keep surfacing, imprinting itself behind his eyes like an old still photograph?

Tucked away beneath the shade of a banana tree, he passed Methuselah. She had poked her head out from her monstrous shell and was sniffing unenthusiastically at some of the moss growing in the cracks of the path's paving stones.

As he ran by, she looked up at him through sleepy eyes. Was he worth bothering with, she seemed to be thinking. The thought made him laugh and he waved at the giant tortoise. Methuselah went back to bothering the moss.

Once again, he felt a pang of nostalgia as he circled the drained, cracked swimming pool. He remembered the old

times when the pale-blue tank was full of water. The Sharon banquets: dark nights round the pool, complete with flaming torches, underfloor lighting making the water shimmer, the native girls. Tacky probably, but Buck had always had that about him. All that olde worlde opulence from the twentieth century. Hawaiian shirts and hula. The boys and their dances the father had taught them: the Madison, the Honolulu, the Twist.

All gone now. And one day, so would be the pool itself, the buildings that surrounded it, the rusting machines in their underground chambers, the vegetation, the rock, the island itself, the sea and finally the planet. An unimaginable temporal distance away. Would he still be here to witness it?

He wouldn't repair the pool, he thought. He was never any good at that practical stuff.

He pushed through the swing doors of the old Sharon mansion and ran up the lovingly designed metal stairs to the lounge. He would have breakfast on the second floor mezzanine and watch the world go by.

XXIV

The island was tiny; they should have no problem finding him. The Doctor waved at the SPB as it bobbed in the lee of the tiny harbour. The troops standing on its bulbous deck did not wave back. To him, the craft looked more like a blue tank than a boat.

Alex Storm was once again leading the way. For some reason known only to himself, he had insisted on arriving at Sharon Island the back way - into this little rocky cove. A battered wooden jetty was the rather precarious means of getting them on to this little speck of sand and trees in the middle of the South China Sea.

Towering cliffs loomed over the pair as they made their way along the steep path towards the interior.

‘Unusual formations,’ said the Doctor. The path had been cut into the rock itself, and tight, compressed wavy layers of strata revealed the geological history of the island. ‘Very tough.’

‘Presumably why Sharon built his base here,’ said Storm. ‘Had hell getting permission from the Chinese Authorities back in the day. Mind, anywhere else in the world the base would have been found instantly. By reporters and TV and all that.’

‘I’d like to know what you’re planning to do, Colonel,’ said the Doctor. ‘You know, when we find him. *If* he’s here.’

The half-smile died on Storm’s face and he turned away, striding up the path again.

‘Only asking,’ whispered the Doctor.

Sulking, he followed Storm, watching the sweat spread on the colonel’s back. He wasn’t going to talk to him, if that was his attitude. Won’t say a word.

‘I don’t see why we couldn’t go round the front,’ the Doctor grumbled, immediately. ‘Nice and flat and sandy there.’

‘Shut up,’ said Storm.

Looking up, he saw that the Myloki squiggles had apparently completed their mysterious interlocking. This grid built to ensnare the Earth. What did it mean?

At last, the cliff path peaked and they began to descend.

Down below, spread out like a child’s toy, was the real Sharon Island. The path stretched steeply down to successive bands of jungle, white beach and finally a limitless ocean. To their left the cliffs curled round a little bay, where lay the Sharon family home.

Surprisingly impressive, the complex resembled nothing less than a South Sea Island theme park Complete with hotel, carved wooden Easter Island idols, golf course, crazy paving and multi-channelled swimming pools. A long, wide tarmac road guarded by palm trees joined the home to the beach. A road streaked with dark burns.

The hotel itself was carved into the rock and the Doctor suspected that much of the complex would be underground. These mountains, for all their tough rock, would be honeycombed with natural tunnels.

‘Look!’ said Storm, genuinely surprised. ‘What the hell’s that doing here?’

The Doctor followed the length of his arm and out to sea. Just emerging from a bubble of foam was a large, arrow-shaped submersible. It bore SILOET livery.

‘The *Manta*. It must be Bishop,’ said Storm. There was a heavy tone to his voice, as if he felt he had been unjustly excluded from something. He sounded disappointed.

They marched through a thin strip of tropical foliage to the beach. Storm was wary, every inch the fighting man now. He had his gun out and was waving the Doctor back as they approached the tree-line and the white beach beyond.

The Doctor watched his sneaking and ducking with some amusement. He waited for the drama to unfold.

About sixty yards in front of them, a man was walking along the sea front, towards the Sharon complex. The Doctor couldn’t make him out, but he was tall and well-built.

Instinctively, he and Storm ducked down, screening themselves behind the thick ferns that formed a barrier between them and the beach.

‘Is that him?’ asked the Doctor. ‘Is that Matthews?’ He realised he was excited despite himself.

At last, he thought. It was about time.

Storm was unhooking his rucksack.

The man strode along the beach, purposeful and determined. There was something about his body language, something the Doctor couldn’t quite place.

Storm unclipped his bag and began to rummage. He hauled out a black box, small and compact, the size of a fist.

The Doctor placed a hand on his arm. ‘Would you mind telling me -’ Storm brushed him away. ‘Now wait a minute.’ He moved in again and this time the captain pushed him hard, causing the Doctor to tumble over.

The man on the beach paused. He turned in their direction, as if spotting them through the greenery. Not hurrying, Storm activated the bland box. A light flicked to green and the machine uttered the flimsiest beep.

The man on the beach snapped into action. He raised an object, an object previously shielded by his body. It was short, stubby and -

‘Down!’ the Doctor hissed as a harsh chattering of bullets chewed up the ferns. They rolled, feeling the earth churning up around them. Lines of sea birds were taking to the air, screeching at the mechanical racket.

‘What the hell?’ snapped Storm, looking up. The man was approaching, determined and efficient, like a train on a track.

Alex Storm turned white. ‘It can’t be.’

The Doctor had rarely seen a man so instantly overwhelmed by fear. Storm seemed to slacken, to collapse. ‘What?’ he asked. ‘What is it?’

Ignoring him, Storm stood up, ready to bolt.

The moving man fired again, and the Doctor saw burning black eyes in a pale, pale smudge of a face. He realised what was so wrong about him. He had never seen a corpse move before.

Storm shrieked, an unpleasant high-pitched squeal, and collapsed. The Doctor saw the blood leaking from his right thigh. Scrabbling in the forest floor, Storm began to scabble away from the beach, panic lending his movements a feverish quality, like swimming. 'Get away!' he bellowed at the Doctor. 'Run as fast as you can.'

The living corpse was ten yards away. He hurled his empty machine pistol to the ground without a glance. The expression on his face was blank, empty, remorseless. This was a man who would never stop, never be halted by anything. And then the Doctor remembered Verdana's book and realised who they were facing.

'Storm!' snapped the Doctor. 'I'll lead him away.'

Too late. Karl Taylor was walking through the bullet-torn ferns.

Storm got a hold of himself. Either that or he realised he had no choice. He rolled back to his transmitter and snatched it just as Taylor was on them.

'Go!' screamed Storm. His voice was heavy with emotion. 'Get out of here!'

These were costly words; Taylor moved impassively on him. The Doctor pounced, but was swatted aside by an incredibly strong arm. He hit the ground, winded.

Through a roaring in his ears, he heard Storm yell. 'You *can* die!' There was a crunch of cracking bones, a high-pitched shriek, and then silence.

The Doctor was paralysed. He couldn't move, no air even in his remarkable lungs. The creature dropped Storm's broken body, then turned to look at him. Studying him. The next bit of business.

'Doctor!' came an outrageously familiar voice, and someone was dragging him to his feet. Thinking it was Taylor, he resisted until a second Scot's shout brought him to his senses. He knelt, then stood, then was off and tumbling along the sand, pulled along by a friend he had no right ever to see again.

His vision cleared and there was Jamie, running alongside him.

Fighting for breath, the Doctor clutched at Jamie's arm. 'Wait. Wait!' He skidded to a halt, sending up a cloud of white sand.

Jamie, a much battered, thinner and desperate Jamie, glared at him as if he was the one who had gone mad. The Doctor looked round. Yes, Taylor was making a bee-line for them. Not hurried, but like he was on holiday. If he had gained any satisfaction from killing Storm, he wasn't showing it.

'Come on Doctor! We have to keep running. Yon man, nothing can stop him!'

The Doctor shook his head. 'I think Storm could. He had something -'

'I've seen him. He just... repairs.'

'Jamie. Trust me!' He became aware of the ridiculous nature of his utterance, given everything that had happened. 'If you really think it is me, of course.'

Jamie looked him up and down, and the Doctor saw something, a softness in his expression, that had long been absent. 'Aye,' he said. 'I know.'

Taylor was closing in. Thank heaven he had used up all his bullets.

'Into the jungle,' said the Doctor. 'We have to double back.'

Jamie stooped and hurled a stone at the approaching figure. The throw was good and the missile struck Taylor in the chest, not slowing him an inch. 'All right,' said the old Jamie. 'When you say run, I'll run.'

They ran.

Getting back to Storm's box wouldn't be as easy as he'd hoped. The foliage wasn't thick enough to really obscure them and Taylor had turned to intercept. They were going to have to make a wide semicircle if they stood any chance of avoiding him.

If he bothers to start running, thought the Doctor, then we're really in trouble. They had to evade his gaze, even for a little while, or he would always cut them off. Or worse, guess where they were heading.

‘We should split up,’ said Jamie. ‘Give one of us a chance.’

‘Not in a million years,’ the Doctor replied. ‘I’m not letting you out of my sight again.’

Despite the tension, Jamie grinned. It was good to have him back. The Doctor wondered whether he really deserved the forgiveness he seemed to have been granted.

First things first. How do you destroy an indestructible man?

They crouched low along a depression in the ground and followed the path of a little stream. Looking ahead, the Doctor saw that the waterway ran parallel with the shore. He risked a peek over the ridge. Taylor was a shadow, a persistent black stain against the bright day, highlighted against the disturbing angles of the Myloki sky web.

Bishop found a way, he thought. It took him thirty years, but he found a way. Now they had to work out what it was.

Jamie was behind him, his sharp senses alert for movement. Not that it took too much effort - Taylor was simply blundering through the trees after them.

Unfortunately, the further they were pushed out from the beach the more difficult it was going to be to find Storm’s body.

SILOET had to have a device. There was no doubt. He had been watching Colonel Storm from the off. The man had been biding his time. He must have told Verdana what he intended for Matthews, which was why the sick man had given Sharon’s position up.

The Doctor felt stung. Bishop hadn’t been swayed by his persuasion skills. His argument that finding Matthews was vital. They had wanted that all along, and the Doctor was a convenient tool. He wondered what the plan had been for him once Matthews was dealt with.

Jamie tugged at his frock coat. The Doctor splashed right into the stream. He looked down to see water flowing freely over his ruined shoes. He turned, just as Taylor walked over the ridge and bore down on them.

The creature reached for him. The Doctor caught a glimpse of a sallow, white face, tinged with a bruised purple. He was indeed a shell, a killing machine. A puppet.

Jamie dived at its legs. He cannoned into them as if they were iron and fell back to the damp bank. Taylor made no indication he had even felt the blow.

The Doctor staggered back, watching those colourless hands reach for him. The fingernails were perfect, despite their graveyard yellow stain. He scrabbled and slipped and went over into the stream. The water was cold and he couldn't get a grip to pull himself up.

Soundlessly, the mouth moved as the hands clasped his shoulders. The grip was colder than the water. Fingers dug in, squeezing his bones. He squirmed, to no avail. The Doctor was trying to manoeuvre (cold, steel grip squeezing out his breath) trying to think, but he had no time. There was no time.

Something rammed into Taylor, knocking him away. The hands released their pressure, yanking half his coat off with them.

Another man had joined the fight.

The Doctor crawled out of the shallow water, listening to the grunt of the struggling combatants. Whoever had hit Taylor had done it with the force of a traction engine.

He slipped and slid his way out of the ditch to turn and get a view of what was going on.

There was Jamie, frozen with indecision.

'The box!' the Doctor bellowed. 'Get the box!'

In an instant, Jamie was off and running.

The two fighters made a startling contrast. One was death-white, the other a deep tanned brown. One was a rigid automaton, the other a moving, lithe athlete.

'Run,' said the new man, with an old-fashioned English accent, rather like the Doctor's own. 'I can -'

His words were halted by a stunning punch to the face from Taylor. The new man flew. The Doctor gulped. He had never seen a man knocked *through* a tree before. Branches and leaves went crashing over.

Matthews, for this had to be Matthews, was prone, lying at the base of the crook-backed tree. His jaw had been shattered, blood streaming over his face. The Doctor got ready to help in whatever way came to him in the next two seconds.

Ignoring the Doctor, Taylor was striding towards Matthews. He was gearing himself up for another ox-stunning blow. The coup de grace. There was nothing the Doctor could do but watch. Matthews lay bleeding and writhing on the jungle floor.

Taylor knelt, clasped his fists and brought a heavy blow down on to Matthews' midriff. The Doctor heard ribs crack.

It was time to leave. Their only chance was the weapon. And that Bishop had got his sums right. 'Jamie!' he shouted. 'Quickly! Quickly!'

He turned back to see Taylor straightened up. Matthews was no longer moving.

Neutrally, Taylor looked around, searching for something. The Doctor halted, one foot in the air, ready to pelt away. But Taylor no longer seemed to care whether he was there or not. He lowered his foot.

The creature found what it was looking for. A very large branch. He snapped it off a tree. After looking the limb up and down, Taylor began to rip away at the extraneous knots and sub-branches growing from the main stem. He snapped the branch in half. Two sharp stakes.

The Doctor was going to have to do something. The only trouble was, he didn't have a clue what that something was. 'Over here!' he yelled. He picked up a handful of wet stones and flung them at Taylor. Anything to get it away from Matthews' body. He was totally ignored. Not very flattering.

The stakes plunged down into the body, one after the other, their tips crimsoning.

The Doctor moaned.

'Doctor!' cried Jamie, stumbling over the forest floor, holding Storm's transmitter box like it was a tray of eggs.

'Well done, Jamie!' he replied. 'Good lad.'

‘What’s it doing?’ His voice trembled at the bloody scene before him.

The Doctor stared down at the little box in his hand. ‘Making sure, I think.’

‘How does that thingie work?’ asked Jamie.

He bit his lip. ‘No idea. We’ll have to cross our fingers. Here goes.’

Jamie realised what he was going to do. ‘Doctor, no!’

Too late. The Doctor flicked a switch and ran at Taylor. The box vibrated in his hand and the lights flickered. Come on you dratted thing, he willed it, tell me what it is you *do*. Just an inkling.

This direct assault finally caught Taylor’s attention. He turned, hands full of dripping stakes. Even now, there was nothing in its face to indicate it knew what was happening. Like a shark, thought the Doctor.

Far too quickly, he reached the looming Taylor. He pulled up short. The black eyes looked him up and down.

‘Whoops!’ said the Doctor. He frantically jabbed every button he could find. Taylor took a step forward.

And then Matthews was on him again. Unbelievably, he had risen and leapt on to his assassin’s shoulders. The Doctor stepped to one side as they overbalanced and fell into the water.

Two nasty-looking metal spikes shot from the front of the box. Were they blades? Was that all? The thing started to vibrate, humming with energy.

Matthews had risen, blood pouring from his wounds. As he cleared water from his face, the Doctor could see his jaw moving, shifting itself back into position. The rips in his chest peeled off and the deep rends caused by the stakes were closing up.

He was still weak. He staggered, trying to ready himself for another onslaught from Taylor.

The Doctor acted. Not exactly how he would have wanted. He slipped on the mud. He slid, almost in slow motion, down the bank. Hitting the shallow, bubbling water, he held the box high over his head. Absurdly, his arms seemed to think

that not getting it wet was more important than stemming his slide.

Right in front of him, Taylor spun and smashed Matthews back into the water. Back to the Doctor, he advanced on his crumpled opponent.

Someone snatched the box from the Doctor's ridiculously outstretched arms. Jamie.

He dived on to Taylor and thrust the spikes deep into his back.

The creature shrugged, hurling Jamie away, the box lodged between his shoulders. The Doctor rolled and looked up, wondering whether anything at all would happen.

Taylor stood stock still, preparing himself for another attack on Matthews. He stepped forward, then staggered, as if drunk.

'Got... you...' Jamie moaned from across the other side of the ditch.

Taylor tried to claw the box from his back but couldn't reach. The device seemed almost sentient, revelling in the grip it had on him. It shook with a malign energy

Taylor took another step forward towards Matthews, who wiped blood from his face. The box began to sing, a joyful electronic tone, winding itself up.

The creature fell to its knees into the stream, still struggling but not an ounce of emotion on its face. It slapped at its back.

The Doctor heard a final electronic screech of triumph, then Captain Taylor exploded into a ball of dust. Head to foot, PRISM uniform and all. He was like a balloon full of soot that had just been popped. The dust dropped into the fast-flowing water and headed out to the sea. Only the box remained, a twisted pile in the stream, blackened, scorched and drained. The Doctor stood and fished it out. He held it in front of him like he'd caught a fish. 'I think it's dead,' he said.

Matthews was looking at him in disbelief.

'Are you feeling all right?' asked the Doctor.

Matthews laughed once. The blood was disappearing from his face. He smiled. 'You know, I could do with a drink.'

XXV

Jamie was asleep on the absurdly long red leather sofa, wrapped in the fake leopard-skin rug that he'd taken a fancy to.

All in all, the Doctor had to concur with his companion's taste. Very modern, very *nouveau*.

He himself felt most relaxed in this sumptuously furnished room. A restaurant overlooking the moonlit bay. One had the view, the stone flagged floor was cool underfoot and in the centre a large bronze and grey-brick fire lit the wood-panelled walls with an attractive orange glow. South Sea Island sculptures and seashell knick-knacks decorated the walls. He had some positive thoughts concerning the TARDIS decor.

Matthews was cooking something in the kitchen just behind the bar. Whatever it was smelt delicious. The Doctor kicked back the switch on his adjustable chair and allowed himself to relax. He felt odd but comfortable in the bathrobe provided for him. He waggled his toes and giggled.

With a drowsy eye, he regarded his sleeping friend. Jamie was flat out, on the verge of snoring, a little flick of brown hair moving softly under his breath.

'Oh dear,' he whispered.

He tried to imagine just how bad it had been for Jamie. Deep, deep trauma. Horrible. Thinking back to their conversation of a few hours ago, the Doctor realised how lucky he was to have such a friend.

There was a new cast to his face as he slept. A seriousness, a maturity born from bitter experience. The Doctor didn't like to be glib, but it was clear the boy had become a man.

The first thing they had had to do was give him water. As he and Matthews carried him up the steps into the Sharon Island complex, the Doctor saw just how wretched Jamie had become. He could hardly walk and had lost an alarming

amount of weight. The exertion of the battle with Turner had brought him to his knees.

'I - I'm sorry Doctor...' he had said, as he let them haul him into the lounge and lay him down on the sofa.

'It's all right, Jamie. I'm the one who should apologise. You just rest.'

'I let him out, see. It was my fault. All of it. I sneaked into the submarine after him.' Jamie seemed to be continuing a conversation he had started inside his own head. 'He... he'd killed the two men, the sailors. Just chopped them down. He was starting up the engines, there was all this noise, so I slipped aboard. I found this... this lid thing on the floor...'

'A maintenance hatch?'

His eyes were full of tears. The Doctor stroked his hair, trying to get him to give in to sleep. 'Aye! Aye!' he replied. 'There was a little space underneath the floor. I don't ken how long I was under there... felt like a long time. And he never stopped, never came away from the controls. No sleep, nothing...'

Dehydration and starvation, thought the Doctor. Cramped in the bilges for days. Such suffering.

'I wanted to stop him.'

Matthews, clearly sensitive to the situation, had slipped out. Sunlight streamed in through the window - marred as ever by the brooding alien lines screening off the sun. The Doctor lowered Jamie down, forcing water into him from a carafe.

'Tell me later,' said the Doctor. Now, I want you to do something for me, Jamie. I want you to drink lots of water and go to sleep. We'll talk later.'

Jamie clutched his arm, fighting fatigue. 'Don't go again. I'm sorry I... doubted you. I was so... so messed up, in my head. I didna know what was what. I should have trusted you. I should have known. I was afraid.' He looked the Doctor in the eye. 'I tell you, I was afraid.'

'Jamie,' the Doctor stated. 'I am proud to call you my friend.'

At last, the exhaustion took hold of him. His eyelids began to flutter. A faint smile creased his lips. 'I knew it was you... on that beach out there...'

'How?' whispered the Doctor. 'How did you know?'

The smile grew broader as Jamie drifted away. The Doctor placed a garish cushion beneath his heavy head.

'Because,' Jamie said. 'Because he wanted to kill you. He was evil. He was as evil as evil can be and you were fighting him.'

The head slipped back and Jamie moaned, dead to the world. The Doctor cradled him a long time, past the bright afternoon and as the room darkened into night.

Matthews returned, wheeling in a large-wheeled lazy Susan and a dish so delicious looking the Doctor didn't dare attempt to put a name to it. Something involving shrimp and very fresh-looking vegetables. The smell made him realise how long it had been since he had eaten.

Looking at this mythic legend he'd been chasing bent over a pair of warm plates and a salad bowl caused the Doctor to giggle. Matthews looked up, puzzled.

'I'm sorry,' said the Doctor. 'It's really not how I expected to meet the Indestructible Man.'

'Oh, really?' Matthews replied, his eyes a piercing blue and creased with good humour. 'And who the hell are you anyway?'

'I am the Doctor, and believe it or not, I've come looking for you. You really didn't want to be found, did you?'

Matthews scooped some of the shrimp and vegetable whatever-it-was on to the plate and handed it over. The Doctor stood up and they walked together to the chunky stone table out on the balcony. Jamie dreamt in the room behind them. The Doctor kept an eye on him all the time.

'Who was it? Sharon?' The blue stare was incredibly piercing.

The Doctor nodded, licking the finger he had prodded into the meal. 'Mmm. I couldn't wait. Delicious.'

'You've come to *bring me in*, I suppose. To SILOET.'

‘Possibly. It depends on you I suppose.’

Matthews looked out at the night sky, with its cadaverous glow. ‘They’re back, aren’t they?’

The Doctor pulled the shell from a shrimp. ‘I have a suspicion they never went away.’

True to form, Jamie woke up at the smell of food. The Doctor was pleased to see that he had recovered some of his old form - his face looked fresher, the bags under his drawn eyes not so bruised.

‘So, what are we going to do now?’ he asked, helping himself to his eighth banana fritter and ice cream.

He was making an effort. The Doctor could see that. A good thing. ‘I think that rather depends on Captain Matthews,’ he said.

Matthews was clearing away the plates. ‘Not Captain. Never again.’

The Doctor nodded. He tried to evaluate this strange, deceptively young-looking man. Matthews was over sixty years old, yet he still looked at most a human thirty. He was tall, with a dark complexion and piercing blue eyes. The Doctor thought back to Taylor on the beach and remembered similar piercing black eyes. Was that the difference? he wondered. Was that how you could tell?

Considering what had happened to him, Grant Matthews seemed to be a remarkably calm and centred human being. He was good-humoured, creative and sociable. The last thing the Doctor had expected. He thought about Verdana’s desperation.

‘Forgive me for asking,’ he began. ‘But I was wondering, do you ever think about your... condition?’

Matthews didn’t return his gentle gaze. ‘Do you think I think about anything else?’

He took a deep breath, wincing slightly. The Doctor noticed that upon occasion, Matthews would rub his chest, perhaps feeling where his nemesis had jabbed away with the stakes. The conclusion seemed to be that pain stayed with him.

‘Who are you anyway?’ asked Matthews. ‘Why did you come here?’

‘I don’t really know,’ replied the Doctor. ‘I have a feeling, that’s all.’

‘About what?’ asked Jamie, his mouth full of melon.

‘That Capt- that Mr Matthews has some part to play in the situation. That, in fact, he may be the key to the whole “invasion”.’

A plate fell from Matthews’ hand. ‘How dare you...’ he hissed. ‘You think I have something to do with that filth up there!’

The Doctor winced. Without meaning to, he’d found a chink in the armour. ‘I didn’t -’ he stuttered.

‘Oh, didn’t you?’

Jamie looked at the Doctor, dropping his food. His hackles were rising, hair-triggered, waiting for a reason to let loose. The Doctor realised he was going to have to be very careful.

‘I did my part!’ Matthews bellowed. ‘Why can’t you leave me alone? It’s got nothing to do with me any more. Don’t you understand?’

‘I understand you’re upset...’

Matthews smiled a cruel smile. ‘Oh, really. Well, let me tell you something. You think I care about Bishop? About anyone? Don’t you understand? Bishop will be mouldering in his grave and I’ll still be here. When SILOET is a forgotten memory, I’ll still be here. When you two are dead and gone, I’ll still be here. I’ll still be here when the lights of this planet go out! For God’s sake, I’m not even a human being. I was made, *made*, you understand? So don’t you tell me what you understand. Don’t you dare .’

An uncomfortable silence. The Doctor nodded, taking this all in. Slowly, degree by degree, Matthews calmed down. This was going to be unpleasant.

‘Why do you think the Myloki returned?’ he asked.

‘I don’t care...’ Matthews slammed his hands on to the meal trolley.

‘Why did they release Taylor and send him straight for you?’

‘Doctor!’ said Jamie. The Doctor waved him quiet.

Matthews was unconsciously clutching a handful of table knives. The Doctor could see them cutting into his palms, blood beginning to leak down his wrists. ‘It’s got nothing to do with me!’ Still that clipped English accent.

‘Why did Bishop spend all that time developing a weapon that would destroy your so-called indestructible tissue? That machine wasn’t meant for Taylor, it was meant for you.’

Matthews hurled the knives at the wood-panelled wall. They crashed and scattered in a chorus of metallic shrieks. ‘Shut up!’ Matthews bellowed.

The Doctor stood up. He stood up on the tips of his toes. ‘You aren’t immortal any more, Matthews!’ he shouted. ‘They found a way!’

Matthews smashed his bleeding hand down on the stone table. ‘No!’ he screamed.

The word hung in the air - a final roar of defiance. He looked at the Doctor. The expression in his eyes dispelled any doubts about his humanity. He was more human than anyone the Doctor had ever known. This shouldn’t have happened to him. The Myloki had made him a god but left him bereft as a man with the means of dealing with it. Of dealing with infinity. No wonder he was wounded and afraid.

A sudden chill of prescience: what would Matthews become in fifty years’ time? A hundred? A thousand? A trillion years? How long did immortality last?

Except...

The Doctor answered that look in the only possible way. The only possible release. ‘They found a way,’ he repeated. Matthews glared back.

Grant Matthews spent the rest of the night pacing the underground chambers of the old Global Response home base. The secrets that lay beneath the holiday resort facade.

To see people again! To find someone who had even an inkling. Bishop had chosen his man well. This Doctor was a fascinating presence, if an irksome one.

The old questions were piling up again. The ones he spent his time running and swimming and training and tinkering to avoid.

The old GR workshops were dark and silent - gigantic mausoleums to the past. His footsteps echoed around the barren caverns.

The proud rocket of LIGHTNING 1 sat in its launch bay, awaiting a final call for help it would never receive. Entropy had begun its inevitable banquet on the rocket, moss and rust patching its once gleaming cylindrical hull.

Matthews recalled the time he had contemplated suicide. Even tried it once, when the publicity was at its worst and the world bayed for his blood. It had seemed there was nowhere to go, nowhere he could hide where they wouldn't unearth him.

He had sat in the bath, watching the razor cuts in his arms heal themselves and realised that even this wasn't an option. Whatever he was, whoever he was, he would go on. In a way, that was what was going to define Grant Matthews. He would go on.

After that, he had sought out and found John Sharon. Out of all of them, John had been the only one who had the remotest idea of what was happening to him - both as a man and a sociological concept.

They had been through it themselves, of course, a little. When Buck Sharon announced to the world that he was the mysterious head of Global Response and that PRISM had poisoned his great gift to the world, the backlash had been total and immense. Buck Sharon had been made to look like a crazy fundamentalist Howard Hughes - and the sons, abused victims of a fanatical control freak.

John had sought him out and brought him out of himself. They had talked, long through the night, here in this very complex. Both broken, both damaged (perhaps even both obsolete). Until John found his calling - the determination to fly one last mission in the biggest Lightning of them all: 2. The opportunity for one last gesture for good. Good and Evil were important concepts to the Sharon family.

Matthews had stayed behind. For him, it was all going to be a lot more complicated. He looked into the vast, empty launch area, back in the present.

There was an echo on stone behind him. He turned, unable to make out a shape in the darkness.

‘Just me, I’m afraid; said the Doctor. ‘I hope I’m not intruding.’

‘No,’ Matthews replied. Despite his earlier anger, he found the Doctor’s presence soothing.

The Doctor walked into view, smiling broadly. ‘Oh good,’ he gushed, like a child. ‘I hate it when people don’t like me.’

Matthews returned the smile. This man was infectious; he brought good humour with him wherever he went. With the Doctor, the world looked a little less gloomy.

‘This is all rather impressive,’ he said, looking around. ‘Runways, tracks, rockets, submarines. I could have done with some of these on my travels. Would have been nice.’

‘I have the feeling you never needed them,’ Matthews replied.

After that rather cryptic observation, they walked on. The Doctor had his hands behind his back and was poking his nose into everything they passed. Matthews, despite his determinations to stay self-indulgent, found himself increasingly lightened. Was this some tactic of the Doctor’s? Or was he always like this?

At last, they found themselves heading back to the elevators that led up to the living quarters.

‘You must have known the Myloki would come for you one day,’ said the Doctor. ‘Didn’t you?’

‘How *could* I know?’ Matthews replied. ‘They made me. I am what I am. They are me.’

The Doctor pressed a hand into his shoulder. ‘A very good answer,’ he said. He thought for a second. ‘I’ve just thought of something else.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Those beams that come down from the Myloki grid. I don’t believe they’re weapons for invasion.’

‘What are they then?’

The elevator doors opened and the Doctor stepped inside. 'I think they're search lights.'

As they stepped into the carpeted lobby of the mezzanine, Matthews felt something, a charge in the air that meant danger.

At the same time, he realised that recently his senses seemed to have got a lot sharper. Other things too, like the ability to spend seven minutes swimming underwater - a feat he thought he'd accomplished through training, but was this what the Doctor was getting at?

'What is it?' asked the Doctor in a whisper.

Matthews realised he had stepped back into the shadowed wall, reacting to his instincts. 'I think there's -'

A shout from the lounge beyond. Jamie.

'Doctor! It's a trap. D - ugh!'

Something heavy like a rifle, knocking out the voice.

Matthews turned back. He could get into the lift. There were weapons down in the workshops. Terrible weapons that could...

The Doctor held him back. 'No,' he said. 'We need to confront this. You need to.'

Was it the knowledge that Bishop could finally kill him that was worrying him? That the thing he thought would never happen was now more than possible? How did he feel about that? Really?

'We can't just let them take us!' he snapped, desperate.

'I don't think there's any choice,' the Doctor replied. 'If you don't go now, I don't think you'll get another chance.' He looked sheepish. 'You have to trust me.'

The click of a weapon. Both heard it, both shrank into the wall. The Doctor looked at him. 'It's all right!' he yelled. 'We won't hurt you. We're coming.' He winked and began walking up the corridor to the lounge.

Matthews held back. He tried to still his beating heart. He waited.

The Doctor turned to him, confused. 'You're not going to trust me after all?'

'I'll be there,' said Matthews. 'There's something I have to do first. You'll have to trust *me*.'

The Doctor looked mock-wounded. He put his hand on his heart. 'Of course I trust you,' he insisted. 'With my life.'

SILOET troops were waiting for them. Obviously, those on the SPB on the far side of the island had come in to see what was going on.

The Doctor wandered into the restaurant, his hands theatrically raised over his head. 'Here we are,' he said. 'Nothing to be frightened of.'

Jamie was rubbing his head where he had been butted. 'Oh, Doctor,' he said. 'Why didn't you run?' He had been handcuffed, and was constantly shrugging off the attentions of the guards.

'Not this time, Jamie,' he replied. 'We've done with running.'

'Where's Matthews?' asked the light-haired captain in charge of the six troops around them.

The Doctor rubbed his chin and looked at him. 'Captain Drake, isn't it?' he said, surprising the soldier.

'How do you know?'

With a big grin, the Doctor grabbed his hand and began to shake. 'My dear fellow, I saw you on the video screen, back in London. How nice finally to meet you.'

Drake shoved him away. 'I repeat, where's Matthews?' He unclipped a pistol. The Doctor noticed he was nervous. He had every reason to be. Come to think of it, he was rather nervous himself.

'Here,' came a voice.

The occupants turned. Captain Matthews walked into the room, wearing his PRISM captain's uniform - scarlet tunic, rigid cap, boots and all. All pressed, cleaned and polished as if he'd been issued it yesterday, not thirty years ago.

'I'm back,' said the Indestructible Man.

XXVI

They were going to lose this war and not even dent the enemy.

The Myloki strikes were increasing in intensity. Increasing by five per cent per day.

The grid encircling the Earth seemed to be some kind of energy reservoir capable of striking at the Earth whenever and wherever it chose. Burrowing in, soaking in. The Earth was being deliberately rotted, like a pheasant left to hang.

Wherever the lances struck, the affected areas succumbed to some kind of alien terra-forming process. Anything caught in the beam was affected - animal, vegetable or mineral. Affected terrain underwent total molecular alteration. And it spread, quickly.

As to the physical make-up of this Myloki blight, information was understandably scarce. SILOET had dispatched one research team to the stricken city of Atlanta, USA. Unfortunately, that team had broken contact and was yet to return.

He put aside the details of hundreds of intercepted distress calls from all those places on Earth still capable of sending such messages. He couldn't afford to think of the human cost. He wasn't going to. What was worst, was that the senders of these messages were desperate enough to believe there might be a response.

Bishop sat down and read the most pessimistic report. He nodded at the simple finality of its conclusion. If Bishop was wrong and his plan, hatched over those long decades, failed, they had 27,000 hours before the Myloki consumed everything.

Koslovski's replacement, the female Doctor Ventham, had forced Bishop off the stimulants and made him sleep.

His dreams were full of terrible, suffocating forces he couldn't describe or visualise. Nothing remained when he awoke but the memory of terror and the face of his wife. Terror and guilt - mistakes made, people sacrificed. In what way was this better than the drugs?

Of course, losing it with Zoe Heriot hadn't helped. That she could break his self-control disturbed him. He remembered the rage he had felt when he held that small face in his fist. The defiant eyes staring up at him.

He couldn't understand how it had happened. Why then? There had been a thousand other more antagonistic opportunities to lose his temper. The idea that he might not be able to control his unconscious mind was the most terrifying thing he could imagine. That his own self could betray him at a vital moment. That his actions might be dictated by a force other than his will. How could he fight what she had done to him? What, indeed, *had* she done?

He didn't have time for this.

There was only one piece of hopeful news, and that was tinged with the crushing knowledge that Alex Storm had been killed. Matthews had been captured.

The full story was not yet known. Why hadn't they used Graham's device?

Perhaps that was why he had lashed out at Zoe. Thirty years of conjecture had come to fruition, only to miss the target right at the death.

Drake was bringing them up now, crammed into the cabin of KING, the airborne half of KINGFISHER. It was the fastest vehicle they had left.

At this eleventh hour, Bishop realised his hands were shaking. The tension was finding release, ways around his conscious discipline. The brain was its own worst enemy, always the way. Once again he thought of Zoe and willed her out of his brain.

'We've lost contact with Lunar Base,' said Lieutenant Anouska in a broken voice.

He remembered where he was, in the command seat. What had she said?

‘Emergency video-links?’

‘Nothing. We managed a partial satellite sweep of the coordinates’ Anouska checked her readings again, as if not believing what she was seeing. ‘There’s nothing but a crater. No explosion, no warning. It’s as if that part of the moon has drifted off into space.’

Bishop nodded. ‘M.I.C. Keep scanning.’

He saw the horror in her face, and the control with which she suppressed it. Good girl. She was getting there.

So they had taken Lunar Base. Adams, all the crew. Everyone.

None of which mattered if the plan worked.

So many considerations to factor in, so many variables.

‘I’m going up to the hangar,’ he said. ‘I want to be informed the exact moment that KING arrives.’

‘M.I.C.’

He stood up, trying to still his trembling fists. He began to walk to the elevators, then checked himself. He turned back to Anouska. She swivelled round, expecting an order. ‘Sir?’

The others also looked at him, all five of them, their faces lit with anxiety. He needed to say something to alleviate that stress, to hold their morale together. ‘I -’ he began. ‘I’m sorry. However, I am convinced we are on the threshold of victory.’

Silence in the Control Centre.

Bishop nodded. ‘Stay at your posts. Monitor any changes. These next few hours will decide the fate of the planet.’

Better. He hoped.

It was time to initiate the plan. Time to play the next move. Without looking back, Bishop stepped into the elevator.

Professor Graham was ready for him on the hangar deck. Maintenance teams worked away noisily on the two CHERUBS sitting on their hydraulic lifts. CHERUB leader had already been launched to accompany KING on its approach. Bishop didn’t want a UFO popping out of the sky to knock it down at the final moment.

'I n-need more time,' said Graham, his hands full of clumsy cables.

'We've just lost Lunar Base,' Bishop replied. 'There is no more time. This has to work.'

'L-Lost? You m-mean, destroyed?'

'I mean lost. Get it working.'

Graham bent over the huge processor, as big as an automobile, that had been hauled down from the secret lab. He was blinking owlishly at the mess of cable jacks in his hands. 'The ME requires huge amounts of p-p- processing p-power,' he said. 'The compressed fusion computer in the original was one of a kind.'

Bishop listened patiently. Boffin liked an audience whilst he worked. Talking seemed to help him concentrate. It didn't matter whether you understood him.

'It recognises and acts on seven trace fields in the DNA chain identifiable as Myloki duplicate matter,' he indicated the seven gaping sockets on the processor, imaginatively running from 'A' to 'G'.

Graham started shoving the cables in, one at a time. 'This p-prototype is a crude forerunner. W-we've been having trouble with the trace fields.' The cables were connected. 'Especially in the higher fields, "F" and "G".'

Bishop looked around the hangar. Technicians were busy preparing the deck. The operation had to be over quickly. As quickly as possible.

His thoughts returned to Zoe Heriot. It was nearly time to bring her up from the brig. He might need her to help sway the Doctor if there was any trouble.

A red light began to swivel on the side of the tank-like processor.

'What now?' Bishop snapped.

'T-Trace failure,' Graham replied. 'We have to get them all or some of the DNA might survive reversal...' his words tailed off as he scanned the tape report trickling out of the machine.

No sense in trying to rush him. He would be ready when he was ready. After all, they'd tested it once in action and the

process had apparently been one hundred per cent successful. The ME did its job. It would do so again.

‘G-Got it!’ yelled Graham.

Bishop forced a smile on to his face. It was time to praise the scientist again. Try and listen carefully, try and understand. This was taking too long.

‘What was it?’

Graham looked up from his ticker tape. He brandished it at Bishop in triumph. “G” - “G” missed a trace, see!’

‘I have KING on visual,’ came the husky tones of CHERUB 1. ‘ETA revised to five minutes twenty.’

‘M.I.C. Any sign of enemy activity?’ asked Anouska.

Bishop was back in the Control Centre for one final review.

‘That’s a negative, SKYHOME. Skies are clear.’ The voice doubted itself. ‘Well, you know what I mean.’

‘Oh!’ The outburst came from a small Chinese woman who had taken Zoe’s station at the monitoring computers. She had stepped up from her chair, in shock.

‘Commander!’ she said, swallowing.

Bishop looked up.

‘Computer predicts 80 per cent probability of localised attack within 15 minutes. On these coordinates.’

Silence in the Control Centre as the news sank in. It was what everyone had been dreading.

Bishop thumped the arm of his chair. ‘Damn!’ he yelled. ‘How do they know? How?’

Localised attack. Buzzword for the stabbing, cancerous light beams. It was inevitable SKYHOME would get in the way at some point. Why now?

Bishop thought numbers. ‘Do we have time to get out of the way?’

The Operations Officer shook her head. ‘Motive Engines are offline. We need a twenty-minute fire-up time.’

Graham’s toys, stealing the power.

Defeat. Here, right at the end. It couldn’t be true.

His head slumped for a moment. All that planning, all that death and sacrifice. To be blown out now. He couldn't allow it.

'Evacuation procedure, Commander?' asked the Ops Officer, hinting.

Bishop looked up. 'This will be over in ten minutes. If they hold off until then, we'll stop them.'

'We could initiate evacuation -'

'No!' Bishop felt a red mist overwhelm him. The injustice, the terrible, crippling odds he had had to overcome. They weren't going to take it from him, not now. Not ever.

'There's been too much running. We stand. We stand and fight.' He stood up, glaring at his crew. 'We stand.'

He walked out, ready for Matthews.

Zoe was struggling ferociously as the guards brought her up from the brig. She spotted Bishop waiting in the hangar.

'I won't help you!' she shouted. 'I won't help you kill him!'

Bishop nodded, as if considering the feasibility of her words. 'Yes, you will,' he replied.

He turned away, then found himself needing to turn back. She was determined to resist. Why was it so important for him to turn her to his way of thinking? Why was he acting so irrationally? He had vague, troubling pictures of Helen in his head. Just as stubborn as the little girl in front of him now.

'Why do you fight?' he asked. 'All I do, all I've ever done, is try to save this planet.'

She shook her head viciously. 'You're a monster.'

For a moment, she got him again. He felt her pierce his heart right through the layers of protection he'd so carefully built up. Yes, you are a monster, said the ice pick as it struck. You have committed terrible atrocities, either through direct action or deliberate withholding of action. You have murdered; torn apart communities; deprived the needy of aid; and sacrificed and betrayed those loyal to you. Are these not the actions of a monster?

No. He did only what had to be done, and which no other human being had the moral courage to do. He wasn't a

monster. He was a man doing a difficult job, and that job wasn't over. There was still further, lower, to go.

'History will absolve me,' he said. 'When we win.'

He nodded, and the guards carried Zoe over to the far side of the hangar to the protection booths.

The intercom clicked into life. 'ETA thirty seconds. Preparing pressurisation units.'

He looked over at Graham. At last, the scientist gave him the thumbs up.

If only the Myloki beam would hold off for another five minutes.

For some reason, as Bishop looked round at his assembled pieces, he found himself smiling. The tension was leaving him, draining away. He felt confident again, at peace.

At last, he thought. At last.

There was a great roar from above. Jet engines screaming against impossible raging air currents.

Bishop waved a hand at Bain, and the assembled SILOET security personnel scattered to join Zoe in the pressurised protection booths. Only he and Graham remained in the maintenance area, activating the hatch lock, ready for the lowering of the exterior ramp.

'Ready?' he directed his coldest glare at the shrinking scientist.

'R-Ready,' came the reply. Boffin looked over the giant generator. 'I hope.' They strode to the airlock.

'Bring it down,' said Bishop into the intercom. The access hatches clanged shut.

With an impressive grind, the ceiling bay doors began to slide open. Through the glass panel of the hatch, Bishop watched a hurricane burst into the hangar. Chains began swinging and the noise rattled the booth.

Two gigantic piston legs dropped the landing platform.

Slowly, the stubby half-plane of KING eased down. Bishop wasn't shaking now. He was still. Inside that cramped cockpit was the final piece in this interstellar game.

We should never have let him disappear like that, Bishop thought. We should have kept him close.

The pistons thumped to a halt, whistling with the effort. Steam poured from the hull as it hit the warmth of the SKYHOME base temperature.

A few minutes more, he thought, that's all I need.

Wary of any last-minute Doctor-ish dodges, he kept his eyes firmly on KING. It sat, placid and uncomprehending, blank cockpit windows like the eyes of some blinded bird.

Myloki, we have you.

The ceiling locks hammered home and the whine of the pressurisation units kicked in.

The doubts suppurated up. Where was the eleventh-hour cock-up? What would the Doctor do to try and throw them? Bishop had thought of everything, everything within his means.

'Commander Bishop,' the intercom crackled. 'Radar reports an energy build-up right over this position. It's a matter of minutes...'

'M.I.C.!' bellowed Bishop, punching the speaker off.

The air was still; the pressure equalised inside the hangar. Hatches slid open again. The opaque eyes of the aircraft stayed blank. How many did it hold? Three, four? Suddenly Bishop couldn't remember.

The security team fanned out, sub-machine guns raised. Their rubber boots thumped on the floor. Bishop nodded at Graham to power up, then stepped out on to the deck.

They were poised, waiting for something to happen. In the background, generators whined as they built up enough power to drain a star.

The red light on Graham's hand unit turned to green and the whine stopped dead. An unnatural silence permeated the creaking metal box in which they so precariously stood. Bishop tried not to count down the seconds in his head.

When the silence was finally broken, it was from a most unexpected source.

Someone on a radio mike was coughing.

The Doctor.

‘Ahem...’ came the voice through the hangar speakers. ‘Is this thing working? Ah.’

As expected, thought Bishop. The trick.

‘Hello SKYHOME.’ The Doctor’s voice was deliberately slow, the words staggered as if he had never spoken over a radio before. ‘Um. Does anybody mind if I come out?’

The security team looked around, almost amused. Bishop felt his blood pressure rise.

‘Matthews!’ he yelled, striding up to the hull.

‘Doctor, no, it’s a trap!’ yelled Zoe. Damn, he’d forgotten she was there. He turned to see Bain hurl her tiny form to the floor.

‘Pick her up,’ Bishop snapped, ignoring the pull in his heart at the sight of her on the ground. ‘We’re not animals.’

The side door of KING was unclipped and swung open. The guards snapped into suitably defensive postures.

‘No tricks,’ Bishop called out.

The Doctor’s voice weaved its ghostly sound round the hangar once more. ‘No. It’s too late for that. But before you do anything silly, I suggest you listen to what we have to say.’

Bishop pointed at the open door. Three guards immediately raced up to cover the entrance. A man emerged, hauling *off* his flight helmet. Captain Drake. ‘Don’t shoot! Commander!’ He waved at Bishop with his thick gloves.

Bishop nodded. ‘Do you have him?’

‘Yes sir, but I think you should -’

A guard pulled him to one side. Drake tried to push him off. ‘Commander. They’ve got a plan -’ The guard caught the sleeve of his uniform and began to drag him from the door. Drake swung the helmet at his attacker’s head and cracked his face. Immediately, the other two guards were on him. ‘There’s no need!’ yelled Drake.

‘Get him out of the way,’ said Bishop. Holding Drake in an armlock, the bleeding guard hauled the captain from the doorway. The other two snapped back into position, covering KING.

Bishop saw the betrayal on Drake's face. One of his best captains. A brave man who had served SILOET faithfully for nearly ten years. Yes, there was certainly lower to go.

'I also have a plan,' Bishop said, refusing to allow emotion into his voice.

'Doctor!' screamed Zoe. 'He's mad!'

Again that irrational surge of anger ruining his self-control. He turned to her. 'Be quiet, or I'll kill you and the Doctor.' Zoe glared at him.

'My dear chap, there's no need for any of this,' said the Doctor, dashing out of the aircraft. He was past the remaining guards before they could react. He didn't even spare them a glance. 'I think I know how to sort out this whole mess. But we must act quickly. Before any more damage is done to the Earth.'

He clapped his hands together and gave Bishop a disingenuous smile. 'I'm afraid your plan won't work,' he said. 'Nearly, but not quite. Sorry.'

Bishop looked at the Doctor, then realised the other wasn't letting him look away. Underneath the buffoon exterior, a fierce intelligence was boring into him, trying to get him to change his mind.

For a second, it worked. Those clear, innocent eyes lifted a veil from his mind. He was wrong. Had been wrong from the beginning. He had missed something.

An emotion, one long suppressed, began to rumble in his insides. A feeling he realised had always been there, biding its time, waiting to overwhelm him.

Grief. And he was about to go under.

'Bishop,' came a voice he hadn't heard in thirty years. The sound of his name was revitalising. Something to hang on to, to use. He saw the Doctor close his eyes in... could it be... defeat?

'Captain,' said the Doctor. 'We agreed...'

Captain Grant Matthews stepped out from KING. He was dressed in his scarlet PRISM uniform and hadn't aged a day Bishop felt a stab of what it was that had consumed

Verdana. Jealousy. To look like that after all this time, it wasn't fair.

Behind Matthews walked another... someone familiar. Macrimmon. He spotted Zoe and ran to her, not stopping even when the guards' guns jabbed at him. He growled at them, knowing they wouldn't shoot without orders. He threw his arms round Zoe. Even this meant nothing.

There was only one man on deck who mattered. The Doctor turned to face him, dismayed.

'I know, Doctor,' said Matthews. 'But this must end.'

He must have known when he flew up, Bishop realised. He must have known what was waiting for him.

The Doctor stood in front of Bishop, arms outstretched in a last plea. He looked absurd. 'Commander, don't!' he said. 'It won't save you! I tell you it won't!'

Matthews pushed him aside. He staggered away.

Bishop was nose to nose with the Indestructible Man. 'I'm ready,' Matthews said. 'Just do what you have to do.'

Thoughts and speculations were lining up in Bishop's mind. He felt the aching loneliness.

Jealousy? With Infinity staring you in the face. No. For who would want what *they* had given him?

'You're sure?' he asked.

Matthews nodded. 'I'm ready. So ready.'

'This is a mistake!' shouted the Doctor. 'Do this and it will never end!' He rushed at Matthews, who tripped him.

There was a hum of power at Bishop's side. He saw the Indestructible Man reach for him, and Graham holding out something sharp and shivering with electricity.

Zoe screamed, and Captain Matthews exploded all over Bishop.

XXVII

The dust expanded.

They were all just *staring*.

Bishop, the Doctor, Jamie clinging to her, the guards, Professor Graham, Captain Drake, everyone. All just staring.

Silence as well as dust washed over them, shoving them in its swell. Zoe had the impression that it would spread across the whole world without stopping, a liquid organism smoothing out the corners and jagged edges of this insanity.

An eternity later, a crackle on the intercom system broke the spell. 'Commander,' came a hesitant voice. 'The energy build-up - it's stopped.'

Zoe thought about Matter Eradicators, tried to think of ways and means of doing the job so totally, so quickly, so irrevocably. Of how long it had taken Graham and Bishop to come up with this terrible weapon. Of what she could have done to stop them.

Bishop seemed stunned. Like he couldn't believe it had worked. Holding his emotions in in that way of his, an achievement she realised she had once admired, but not any more. He looked around at the assembled company.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said. 'We've won the war.'

Zoe felt Jamie grip her tighter. She looked up at his wonderful face. Pale and too thin, but there was something back that had been gone. He was *him* again.

'I killed him,' said the Doctor. The despair in his voice was frightening. He looked up at Jamie and Zoe. 'How could I get it so wrong?'

'Aw, Doctor,' said Jamie. Zoe felt strength building in his body. 'Could you not see? He knew all the time. It was what he came here for. What he wanted. Anyone could see that.'

Zoe started to cry. She couldn't help it. And the more Jamie stroked her hair, the less she was able to control herself.

‘Come on, lassie,’ he said to her. ‘You’ll be making a show of us.’

She thumped him softly on the chest. ‘Oh, Jamie.’ Sniffing, she buried her face in him. She didn’t want Bishop to see her like this.

The Doctor was leaning against the hull of the aircraft, staring at the dust. He looked as old and sad as she had ever seen him. He looked beaten.

This wasn’t what he’d planned - to bring a man here to have him killed. He was incapable of that.

Someone had to answer, to explain.

Bishop. Standing there in the hangar like the cock of the walk. The triumphant general. He had to answer her. She would make him.

In the meantime, he was regarding his assembled troops. He snapped to attention. ‘I resign my position as senior commander of SILOET, effective immediately.’ The words were cold, emotionless blocks, straight from a rule book. ‘Captain Drake, you are senior officer on the station. Subject to ratification by the executive committee, I place the command of SILOET in your hands.’

Drake blinked with surprise. It took a while for the guards to realise that it might be a good idea to release him... now that he was their commanding officer.

Almost instinctively, it seemed to Zoe, Drake stood to attention. ‘Commander!’ He acknowledged the order, then looked at the Doctor. ‘What about the prisoners?’

Bishop smiled. Zoe didn’t like the look of it. He considered his words carefully. ‘What prisoners, Captain Drake?’

‘Sir!’ Drake nodded once and the guards backed off.

‘Good luck,’ said Bishop and there was a new, more emotional tone to his voice. He glanced at Zoe, then walked out of the hangar.

It seemed that in no time at all, they were alone. The three of them together again.

Zoe tried not to look at the Doctor’s face. He sat, cross-legged in the dust, lost in his thoughts.

‘Aye, well,’ said Jamie, walking listlessly back to the solid hull of KING. ‘Let’s hope that’s the end of it, eh?’

‘Would you mind telling me just exactly what went on there?’ Zoe asked. ‘That man, was -?’

Jamie nodded. ‘Indestructible. Except he wasn’t.’ He sat back against the hull, looking dead on his feet.

‘But how could that end the war?’

‘I don’t know. It’s all gobbledegook to me.’

Zoe turned to the disconsolate figure on the floor. ‘Doctor?’

‘Zoe,’ he murmured. ‘It’s lovely to see you again.’

‘You can’t have known what they were going to do to him, Doctor...’

He looked up at her. ‘Oh, but you see I did know. I just thought I was cleverer. I knew they wanted to...’

‘To kill him?’

A new voice broke in on the conversation. ‘Th-Th-That’s right,’ it said. ‘To k-kill him.’

Professor Graham walked out from the gloom of the hangar, where Zoe realised he had been perched the whole time, forgotten. His big eyes stared through the glasses. ‘I never thought the ME would be so... e-e- efficient. I didn’t believe...’

What had just occurred? Zoe knew enough about Bishop by now to follow his line of reasoning. Start at the end and work back, she thought. What would Matthews’ destruction achieve?

Work back. Think. (Poor Jamie so thin, so starved...)

And then she knew, she knew everything.

Graham was picking up the smouldering remains of his machine. The last of the dust slid through the floor grills.

‘He was a construct, wasn’t he? A duplicate,’ said Zoe, staring at the dust. ‘A Myloki creation with a human soul. A bit of both.’

Graham nodded. ‘S-So the Commander believed. He believed the way to win the war was to understand them and their philosophy. Spent decades trying to understand their mystery.’ He looked up with wonder, as if staring through the deck hatches to the sky beyond.

Almost unconsciously, the Doctor picked up the story. 'Blowing up their moonbase was enough to make them have to start the war. They must have already been experimenting with this reality, finding ways in.'

Graham blinked. He seemed to see the Doctor for the first time. 'Of course! That's so... brilliant.'

'Is it?' the Doctor replied without enthusiasm. 'They even found a way to affect our reality - to reproduce its conditions. Tenuously at first with the Shiners. Then the duplicate Captain Taylor - an imperfect copy. A prototype. Finally, success with Captain Matthews. However, they built him, but they couldn't unbuild him. They came back because they had to. Not through choice, that was important, but because there was no other way for them.'

'Th-That's what the Commander believed. Here were two entirely opposite species, unable to co-exist or even comprehend each other. And one man - one creation - that was both at once.'

Zoe felt she almost had it, almost.

Graham began to unravel the cables on his blackened machine.

'The Myloki were too clever,' said the Doctor. 'They made him too well. Invested too much of themselves in him. Somehow, his presence in our... continuum was painful for them in some way. Like a man with his finger stuck in an electric socket and unable to pull it out.'

Zoe nodded. At last. At last she understood. She walked up to Jamie and held his hand. 'So they had to sever the connection. Pull out the fuse.'

'Kill him,' said the Doctor. 'I think Captain Matthews was unique. The others, the Shiners and even Taylor were different. Shells controlled from an external source - from the other side. But with Matthews, I think they put something of themselves into him and sent him back. A new experiment - a direct hybrid of human and Myloki. Some essence of them...' he said, 'over here.'

'But how do you kill an indestructible man?' asked Zoe.

Graham held up his now useless cables. 'That was the question,' he beamed.

If Zoe had ever experienced a moment of utter hatred for the absolute values of science and logic, it was looking at Professor Graham's smug, triumphant face just then. It was easy to imagine him and Bishop tucked away in their little laboratory, working laboriously through the permutations, the possibilities, the strategies. She would never, ever be like that again. She turned away from him in disgust.

'You know, I think the Commander l-likes you,' he called after her.

Zoe laughed - bitter and choked.

Jamie put his arm round the Doctor and lifted him to his feet.

'Look, I don't know much, but I know he wanted to die,' said Jamie. 'I know the look.'

Zoe took his hand.

'Aye. I know,' he said to the Doctor. 'Now go and tell them what *they* need to know.'

The Doctor shouldered his way through the door and into the beeping, chirruping Control Centre.

After the echoing silence of the hangar, the clamour seemed harsh and grating, voices piling in one on top of the other.

'All energy activity in the Myloki grid has ceased, Commander...'

'Reports from affected surface areas... the blight is slowing...'

'Organised rescue operations are sending signals in mainland Europe, Middle-Eastern territories and China...'

Bishop looked up from a screen and spotted the Doctor. He ignored the arrival and turned away.

'Commander, you're wrong,' said the Doctor.

For once, the irritation surfaced. It was as if, by relinquishing command, Bishop had decided to allow himself human emotions. 'The war over!' he snapped. 'Go home.'

‘In fact,’ said the Doctor. ‘I believe you have, by your monstrous action in that hangar, prolonged this conflict and polished off our last chance of stopping this business with the Myloki. Put that in your pipe and smoke it!’

Needled beyond endurance, his big moment pricked, Bishop strode up to the Doctor. ‘Don’t you listen?’ He jabbed a finger into the Doctor’s chest. ‘Can’t you hear? The war’s over. We won. Live with it.’

The security chief the Doctor remembered from London, Bain was his name (by nature, too, ho ho), came clattering into the room with his security guards. ‘Get that man out of here!’ Bishop snapped.

‘You’re wrong,’ said the Doctor. ‘And if you don’t face that fact now, you soon will.’

‘Bain. Arrest him!’

Resigned, the Doctor closed his eyes and prepared himself for the inevitable guard grip. When it didn’t come, he popped one eye open. The only clue was that Bishop had gone red in the face.

‘Drake!’

The young Captain, whom the Doctor surmised warranted the description of ‘fresh-faced’, looked daunted, but defiant. He stood in the doorway to the Control Centre, incongruous in his naval flight uniform. ‘No, Commander. I’m in charge here, and I say we should listen to him. If he’s right, it may already be too late.’

The Doctor tried to look modest, whilst Bishop went so red that it seemed a literal explosion wasn’t far away.

Somehow, with some Herculean effort, he kept himself under control. He bunched his fists, visibly forcing himself to stay calm. The crew shifted, uncomfortable, wondering which one to believe. Not surprisingly really, one minute it was all over, the next...

‘Commander,’ Drake prompted. ‘We have to prepare for every eventuality.’

‘Really,’ said Bishop. ‘And what does “the Doctor” suggest we do?’

‘Well,’ said the Doctor helpfully, ‘firstly I suggest we evacuate SKYHOME. I think there are going to be repercussions...’

‘No!’ Bishop hissed through his teeth. ‘Listen to me, all of you. I’m telling you, it’s done. Over. There’s no other logical possibility.’

He glared at his crew, daring them to answer.

‘I’m sorry to disappoint you, Commander,’ said the Doctor, as softly as he could. ‘But you’re wrong.’

The alarm system clanged into life. Anouska looked up. ‘Myloki energy beam. Right over us.’

‘They haven’t finished with us,’ said the Doctor.

XXVIII

SKYHOME appeared in the stricken blue sky, like a spinning top dropped into an ocean.

The unwieldy, bulbous structure was hovering over a field of cloud with streaks of vapour hanging on to its battered superstructure. The residue from the anti-gravity exhaust rippled the atmosphere beneath them, staining the cloud below yellow.

CHERUB leader, Eva Bendix, cut speed to Mach 2 and altered bearing to over-fly the approaching headquarters. Until she received orders otherwise, her job was to maintain a defensive patrol.

The base was caught and outlined in her head-up display, then almost without knowing it she had flown over it and it was gone.

Eva was always surprised how the unlikely structure had stayed up so long. A marvel of long-ago technology, never designed to last the decades it had, surviving storm, lightning strikes, direct attack and power failure. Battered and bruised, SKYHOME was a survivor, never beaten, and now called back into action.

Much like herself, she thought. Rescued from the grim banalities of flying oil shuttles in the rotten United Zion Arab States.

When the recall came from Bishop, she had had no compunction about stealing a UZAS Learjet and heading straight up to SKYHOME. She was back where she belonged.

Dipping below the clouds, Eva dropped the CHERUB to 8000 feet and slowed to subsonic to have a look at ground conditions. Her white-gloved hands flicked switches to tap into local transmissions. She rolled back her orange visor, the clouds now blocking out the bright sun.

She was somewhere over Sydney. The Opera House still stood, as did the Harbour Bridge. She had heard that Australia had been spared some of the decline of other continents over the past few decades, mainly due to comparative wealth and a well-dispersed population. She recalled that their troubles were confined to a few bike gangs, barely contained by their MFP police department.

Now, the city was in the process of changing. The larger buildings appeared to have turned to sponge and were sinking in on themselves. The highways were swollen and molten. A direct hit from a Myloki beam. The harbour water seemed to have turned into some kind of thick pink and yellow blancmange. Or vomit.

However, there was positive action down there. As Eva flew over in criss-crosses, she saw the flashing blue of emergency vehicles picking their way through ruined streets. There were even two emergency helicopters hovering over the vile harbour. Chains of vehicles seemed to be ferrying people away from the affected areas, and orderly queues waited in the suburbs.

Eva felt a rush of emotion. The human race wasn't done for yet. She hauled back on the stick, and the CHERUB was back among the clouds again.

Something was happening to the Myloki web. Eva flicked on her cockpit camera and opened up her communicator. 'SKYHOME,' she spoke into her helmet mike. "This is CHERUB 1. Am detecting alterations in the enemy formation..."

There was a hiss in her ears, then a loud growl of static. Jamming? 'Come in SKYHOME!'

The whole grid was shifting, rippling. It was restructuring its nacreous lines as if playing some strange logic game. Every time a string faded out, its energy snaked to an adjacent remaining string. The grid was bringing itself in; condensing and concentrating its energy as it collapsed down. The process was quick and busy, reminding Eva of thousands of termites swarming in to a central nest. And it

wasn't difficult to see where it was gathering itself. Underneath the growing, glowing centre was SKYHOME.

Something flickered, like lightning. Two circles of light, milliseconds, nothing more (almost subliminal), crossed her cockpit. Where had they come from?

If she couldn't report in she was going to have to do something.

For a second, the growing core of energy high above seemed alive - animate. It must have been her imagination, for it seemed, just for an instant, as if a veil was drawn aside and a face, vast and unimaginable, was looking down, leering at the world. Then it was gone and Eva was heading desperately for that core, arming missiles as she increased speed.

There was something moving at Jamie's feet. He looked at Graham, who looked back at him, bemused.

'It's the dust,' said Zoe.

Instinctively, Jamie jumped. Zoe was right, it was the dust. Swirling, like sand blown across a beach. Only this was sand with a purpose.

'It c-c-can't be...' said Graham.

The dust began to grow. Clumps forming and expanding, solidifying into a solid form. A pile appeared, thick and rising.

Suddenly, it wasn't dust any more, but solid stuff. Jamie blinked as shapes he recognised grew out of the pile - a boot, the flailing stick of an arm, flesh growing over bone.

He was coming back together, uniform and all.

A skull swelled into existence, then grew skin and eyes and hair. Lastly, a stiff-brimmed cap stretched from the top of that head. Jamie watched breath expand in the solid torso. It howled in pain. Features melted into shape.

Captain Matthews staggered, whole again, then fell over. He was clutching his chest.

Zoe ran to the fallen man.

'Commander Bishop!' yelled Graham, turning to run. 'Commander Bishop!'

Jamie hurled himself at the dome-headed professor. 'Oh no you don't,' he snapped.

Graham cowered. 'Don't hurt me! Don't hurt me!' and Jamie felt a gag of disgust. The huge spectacles skittered across the deck.

He dragged Graham over to Matthews. 'Aye, it's different when it's you, eh?' He forced the scientist to look. If he could see anything without those glasses.

it failed,' Graham moaned. 'The ME failed.'

Zoe lifted Matthews' head from the floor. He was conscious but his breathing was laboured, as if he had something stuck in his throat.

'Hey Zoe; Jamie asked. 'How come he's still got his clothes?'

Zoe tugged at the scarlet PRISM uniform. 'I don't know.'

Graham snickered. Jamie tugged his sweaty collar. 'Do you?'

'It's obvious,' Graham replied. 'This m-must be his original uniform. The one he was wearing when he was duplicated.'

'Eh?'

'I see,' said Zoe. 'Perhaps the Myloki couldn't tell the difference between clothes and Matthews. Perhaps they thought it was all the same thing and duplicated the lot. Made everything indestructible.'

It was that seemingly trivial thought that really brought home to Jamie just how different their enemies actually were. If they couldn't even spot that...

Matthews groaned. 'Where am I?'

'SKYHOME; said Zoe.

His eyes cleared and he was back with them. He gripped Zoe's arm. 'It can't be,' he said.

He dropped his head back. The despair in his voice was black and total. 'I really am indestructible.'

In terms of actually understanding anything, Jamie admitted to himself he had been in the dark for a long time now. What had changed was that it didn't matter to him. He knew what he wanted, what was worth fighting for. Strange men returning to life from total annihilation didn't matter him one bit. Even this strange, never-seen invader everyone went on about no longer mattered. As long as he and Zoe and the Doctor could get back to the TARDIS and on with their

lives together, that was him done. Not to say that the Doctor couldn't solve all the problems they came across, he would do that until the end of Time. That was what he did. What Jamie would always do was make sure they all came through it safely. He would ensure the Doctor got on with what he had to do.

He would do that and that was all he would concern himself with. Everything else could comfortably go right over his head.

Satisfied, and feeling lighter than he had in months, Jamie held out a hand for Captain Grant Matthews to pull himself up.

Which is when an explosion went off, somewhere in SKYHOME.

A second blast rocked the station, knocking it out of its spinning kilter. The gyros screamed and the whole place lurched sideways.

The Doctor grabbed hold of whatever he could as the deck tilted and equipment began sliding across the floor. Like a sinking ship, he thought - already wishing his simile had been a little less literal. The shrieks of the terrified crew seemed to echo his sentiments.

He held out a desperate hand as one of the white-uniformed crew tumbled by. Unable to grab anything, the woman cannoned into the bulkhead wall.

'Emergency power!' yelled Bishop from somewhere and someone had the presence of mind to listen and obey, for seconds later, the list was righted. There was a screech of energy and SKYHOME rolled slowly back to the horizontal. Almost. Equipment and people crashed to the deck.

'The energy blast,' said Bishop. He was holding on to a bolted-down table, eyes ablaze, face a bright crimson under his white hair. There was no doubt who was in command again.

'No,' said the Doctor. 'Something hit the station. A missile, or something very like.'

‘That’s impossible. Nothing can get this high...’ Bishop frowned. ‘Where’s CHERUB leader?’

Captain Drake shoved the bleeding radar operator out of the way and operated the scanning machinery. ‘Outside. On patrol. Heading for us.’

Bishop didn’t hesitate. ‘Anti-aircraft. Now!’

‘But sir...’ Drake protested. ‘How do we know...’

‘Now!’ Bishop raised an arm, as if to strike his junior. The Doctor could only watch, breathless. For once, he had to agree with the Commander.

Angry, Drake slammed a series of buttons. On the radar screen, a cascade of bright blips spewed out from the centre light of SKYHOME.

‘Aerial mines,’ Bishop muttered, for the Doctor’s benefit.

As they watched, a larger blip darted towards the centre. Towards them.

‘SKYHOME to CHERUB Leader, communicate please,’ Drake had grabbed a headset and was rapidly trying to get hold of the pilot at the other end. ‘Come in CHERUB Leader!’

Bishop turned to the Doctor. He was utterly calm once more. ‘They’ve taken her. Eva. The old tactics.’

‘Don’t sound too satisfied,’ warned the Doctor. ‘She may still get through.’

‘Never,’ Bishop replied. ‘Nothing gets through that. Even them.’

As if to reinforce his statement, there was a brief flare-up on the screen, and the blip that was Eva Bendix disappeared.

The Doctor turned away.

‘Target destroyed, Commander,’ said Drake. He barked at the assembled flight crew. ‘Damage report! Are we going to stay in the air?’

‘Why now?’ Bishop was asking himself. ‘Why go back to taking over our men? Why didn’t they do it before?’

‘There’s only one explanation,’ the Doctor croaked.

He leant against the intercom and flicked a switch. ‘Jamie? Zoe? Are you there? Has anything happened?’

A brief kerfuffle as Jamie worked out how to use an intercom, and then the voice of his friend. ‘Doctor! Doctor!’

Half the hangar's fallen in.' A pause. 'The scientist, he's dead. Broken neck. He tried to run when the bombs went off.'

What else, Jamie? What else?'

'Him,' came the voice. 'He came back.'

'Thank you, Jamie. I think you had all better come up here straight away.'

The Doctor realised the whole of the Control Centre was staring at him. Bishop stood, mouth open in shock.

'I'm afraid your little plan has come unstuck, Commander,' said the Doctor.

In front of his eyes, without warning, Bishop crumpled. He sank to his knees, hands over his eyes. He looked up at the Doctor. The horror in his face was awful. Here was a man from whom everything had been ripped away.

'Thirty years...' he said. 'It... he... can't...'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Commander,' he said. 'Up you get. There's work to be done.' Not for the first time he wondered why nobody ever listened to him until the very last minute..

Bishop tried to get himself under control. The Doctor could practically see the muscles twitching and working to regain composure. But this time his conscious mind couldn't get a grip on his emotional self. The long-buried feelings were out and he wasn't going to be able to put them back in again.

Bishop stood up, his whole body trembling. His complexion was as white as his hair, his eyes frightened and lost. 'I - I won't believe it,' he said, it's not true.'

Captain Grant Matthews, as young and untouched as the day he was created, walked into the Control Centre. His face was set and angry.

'Believe it,' he said.

Bishop took a step back, shaking uncontrollably. He glared at Matthews, willing him out of existence. 'Why won't you die?' he hissed.

Somehow, a pistol appeared in his hand. The Doctor couldn't tell whether he'd had it all the time or whether he had grabbed -

Bishop fired a bullet into Matthews. The Indestructible Man stumbled backwards, wincing with the pain. He straightened up and took a pace forward.

Bishop fired again, and again, pumping shots into Matthews' body. Each impact caused him to fall back, but he always came on again.

'Die! Die! Die! Die!'

At last, the pistol was clicking empty. For the final time, Matthews regained his feet and reached Bishop. He grabbed the Commander's wrist and with his other hand plucked the gun from his grasp. He stared into Bishop's eyes. 'I've died so many times it's boring,' he said and punched Bishop in the face.

Drake reacted quickly, ready to make a move to defend his Commander when the Doctor bellowed, 'Wait!'

Bishop hit the deck, unconscious. Matthews nodded once, then turned to the Doctor. Zoe and Jamie appeared, rather nervously, in the frame of the doorway.

'All right Doctor,' said Matthews. 'How do we finish this?'

XXIX

He noticed how the rest of the SILOET crew kept well away from him. Was this what things had come to? Was he a new Frankenstein's monster? Was he really that different?

Matthews, Captain Drake and all the senior SILOET personnel on the base were trying very hard to understand what the Doctor was going on about.

He had commandeered the old lounge and was presently pacing the luxurious carpet, expounding. Matthews had the impression he was enjoying himself.

'Now then Captain Drake,' he said. 'I take it you can, er, move SKYHOME? How high can you go?'

Captain Drake coughed, clearly embarrassed by his new authority. 'It didn't get up here on its own, Doctor.'

'Why?' asked Zoe.

The Doctor took a deep breath. He grabbed his braces in an attempt to look efficient and serious. 'Well, it's very important that we get as close to the grid as possible. That energy isn't being concentrated up there for fun, you know.'

It was clear Jamie had had enough of being polite. 'Come on, Doctor. Tell us what you know.'

The Doctor smiled warmly. 'Ah, that's the thing, you see, I don't really know. I just guess.'

'So,' said Zoe. 'What do you guess?'

As if delighted to have been asked this vital question, the Doctor raised a celebratory finger. 'Ah!' he uttered. He smiled and appeared very enthusiastic. 'Well, put simply, I suggest we totally evacuate SKYHOME, then stoke up the engines. We get ourselves as high up as possible, then use one of the aeroplanes to enter the grid directly.' He looked at Matthews, and despite the smile there was in his eyes the glint of something serious. Serious and very, very sad.

‘It was tried, Doctor,’ replied Zoe. ‘The Lunar Base sent two ships to fire bombs into it. One disappeared. And now the base itself has gone.’

‘This time,’ insisted the Doctor, ‘we shall have something they want. Or rather, someone.’

Matthews had been waiting for it, but it was still a shock to hear it spelt out like that. Of course. That’s what it was all about. Him.

The lounge was quiet. Only the slow whine of the increasing engines. A warm up to test the feasibility of the ascent. To see whether they would, in fact, actually work.

Matthews was aware that everyone was looking at him.

‘So,’ said Jamie, clearly shocked. ‘You’re going to give him up? Just like that?’

The Doctor nodded. ‘There really isn’t any alternative.’

‘They’ll kill him!’ said Zoe. ‘That’s just what Bishop was trying to do.’

‘Doctor,’ said Drake. ‘No.’

Suddenly, Matthews felt like a cancer patient. ‘I am here, you know,’ he said. ‘Doctor, you carry on. Tell us. Tell me.’

‘Thank you,’ said the Doctor. ‘You see, and at the risk of being indelicate I apologise, I don’t believe there is any way we *can*... er... kill Captain Matthews’

Again, it was one thing to know, another to have it out in the open air, stated, a fact. The Doctor looked sheepish.

‘Carry on,’ said Matthews.

‘Which puts us in a quandary. By us, I mean us and the Myloki. They created Captain Matthews but, as they could conceive as little of us as we can of them, they created him to be their idea of a human. In this case a perfect human. Capable of resisting all damage to his physical form. So, although they find his presence here somehow intolerably painful, they are unable to do anything about it.’

‘But why do they do all this then, with the grid? Why attack the whole planet?’ asked Drake.

The Doctor spoke slowly, almost trying to get his thoughts straight in his own mind. ‘Because, believe it or not, I think this side - our side - is stronger than theirs.’

A chorus of voices, everyone talking at once - disbelief rampant. 'I know, I know,' the Doctor continued, holding up his hands for calm. 'But I believe that to be the case. There are two possibilities for these attacks. Firstly, the energy beams could be a kind of probe, searching for their own matter. I'm sure that they home in wherever there is something left behind from the first war. Eventually, they would have located Matthews. The probes are very inefficient, having to interact directly with our world. They burn what they touch, and infect. However, that is, I believe, a by-product of their true intent. The two realities are antipathetic to each other. Direct contact causes a kind of cancer in this world, a spreading blight. Hopefully, not fatal. But as they affect us, I'm sure we affect them. Imagine a man drilling a road with an electric drill. He hits a piece of hard granite and the shocks up the drill shake his arm. Heaven knows what kind of shakes are transmitted back to the Myloki.'

'Good!' shouted Bam. 'Who cares about them?'

Drake interrupted. 'Quiet! Doctor, you mentioned two possible reasons.'

Again, the Doctor looked at Matthews. 'Yes, I did. And the second is almost too terrifying to consider. It implies an intelligence and an ability beyond even my own capacity to comprehend.'

He paused, trying to find the words.

'Well?' snapped Matthews. 'You might as well say.'

'They are transforming the Earth,' said the Doctor. 'They can't extract Captain Matthews by any means at all, so as a last ditch effort they're going to change our reality to adapt to their life conditions.'

'What?' asked Jamie. 'What does that mean?'

'You mean,' said Drake, 'they're terraforming the planet. They're just going to wipe us all out.'

The Doctor nodded. 'That is exactly what I mean.'

When they had all filed out to get on with their tasks, the Doctor asked Matthews to stay.

‘I want to ask you,’ said the Doctor. ‘Do you feel any different?’

‘Different to what?’ asked Matthews. ‘You mean, do I feel any Myloki influence? Well, I don’t know. Because I am a Myloki - at least half of me is. So how would I know what was different?’

The Doctor was magnanimous in defeat. ‘A good answer.’

Matthews placed a hand on the Doctor’s shoulder. ‘I know you feel guilty,’ he said. ‘But you shouldn’t. You’re offering me a chance. My only way out. Whatever that means.’

The Doctor looked up at him. ‘But you’re not sure whether to trust me, are you? You’re frightened.’

Matthews smiled. ‘You’re right. I’m bloody terrified. But there’s no other way, is there?’

The Doctor patted the hand. ‘No. No there isn’t.’

Without the need for further words, both turned for the exits.

Outside in the corridor, after Matthews had marched away, the Doctor found Jamie and Zoe waiting for him. They were tense, excited.

‘Doctor,’ said Jamie. ‘Zoe’s thought of an answer!’

‘Really?’ A big grin appeared on his face. ‘Thank heaven for that.’

Jamie held out his arms, ready for the Doctor to have his socks knocked off.

‘Zoe?’

‘This way, Doctor.’

The pair led him up hill and down dale, with a few ladders thrown in. At last, in a little room he saw something he hadn’t seen for a very long time. A very welcome sight.

‘Ta da!’ sang Zoe.

The girl adjusted herself to look very serious. The Doctor felt so glad to have them both back to their old selves. ‘What we do,’ said Zoe, ‘is take Captain Matthews with us in the TARDIS. We leave Earth and take him with us.’

Jamie nodded enthusiastically. ‘How clever is that?’

The Doctor rubbed his chin. ‘My friends. It’s a wonderful plan.’

Zoe could see it at least. She flopped, just a little. ‘But it won’t work, will it?’

‘I don’t think so. Sorry. I don’t think that would stop the Myloki. In fact, I think it would probably spread their influence. Make the situation worse. Anyway, how would we know whether it worked or not? We would never be able to return and check. Not if Captain Matthews was with us, anyway.’

‘But you don’t know that, Doctor!’ said Jamie.

‘You’re right, I don’t,’ he replied. ‘But I know about my plan.’

Zoe looked down the corridor. ‘It’s just that you don’t... *like* your plan, do you?’

The Doctor nodded. ‘Very perceptive.’ He held out his arms and patted them both. ‘Jamie, Zoe, I am proud to have you as my friends. I don’t know if I ever told you that before. Thank you.’

Jamie looked stricken. He understood why the Doctor had said what he’d said. ‘You’re going, aren’t you? Why do you have to go? There’s no need.’

‘Really Jamie. What if something should happen? I’m what they like to call “back-up”.’

Jamie was incensed. ‘That’s rubbish. You just feel bad about sending him on his own.’

‘Absolute rot.’ He didn’t even sound convincing to himself.

Something boomed deep in the depths. SKYHOME rocked unsteadily, as if caught bobbing in an increasingly turbulent current. ‘The engines I think,’ said the Doctor.

The station lurched once more, and horribly the anti-grav cut out for a few seconds. The sudden drop reminded even that most confident of travellers that metal did not naturally float in mid-air. The motors cut in again and SKYHOME stabilised.

‘Engines or something else?’ Jamie asked.

‘There isn’t much time, is there?’ said Zoe.

‘I think we had better get to the hangar.’

Drake was leaning against a chair in the Control Centre, trying to perform three jobs at once. He was alone, overseeing the evacuation. Next to him, crouched on top of a console, was his flight helmet. He was suited up, ready to ferry the Doctor and Matthews up in KING. Troubled, he tapped away at a console.

‘Activating launch sequence. Opening bay doors.’

‘Negative, Com,’ came the voice of the escape shuttle pilot. ‘We are still awaiting Red Section.’

‘They should be there by now.’ Red Section. Security.

SKYHOME rattled. The monitors and scanners flickered and static-ed out for a second. They wavered as their images returned. Drake saw that some kind of energy was feeding down from the energy concentration. There might not be a long time left. They were drawing attention to themselves.

He turned to the intercom. ‘Red Section! Red Section! Identify location, immediately!’

The speaker squawked. No response. ‘What the hell?’ Drake snapped. He was going to have to find them himself. He picked up his helmet, started to leave, then thought again. Maybe he should take a weapon.

Someone was standing in the doorway. A security guard. ‘Where have you been...’ Drake’s voice tailed off, as the guard raised his gun.

Matthews checked the final seals on the escape vehicle - a big white saucer designed to drop to Earth with as little discomfort as possible. Although full of padding and about sixty parachutes, it had never been tested. No wonder the departing crew looked anxious as they strapped themselves in.

His cap mike flipped down. ‘Drake, where’s Red Section?’

Through static, he heard the response. ‘They’re safe. Launch immediately.’

Wondering why he felt so uncomfortable, Matthews banged on the hatch and ran back to the airlock.

Something was wrong, he was sure of it. Suddenly he remembered the final moments with Adam in the Myloki base on the moon. That same feeling of inevitable dread.

‘Control, are you sure?’

Nothing. No reply. Drake must already be on his way to KING on the flight deck.

A clock ticked down. They had to launch now.

SKYHOME shook as the gravity locks nullified and the escape vehicle dropped away. ‘Good luck,’ came a voice through his cap mike. Anouska. The first positive words he’d had from any of them.

Somehow, as the station bounced and the automated engines began to roar, Matthews already felt as if the place was lighter. Thinner. An odd notion. SKYHOME lurched unpleasantly. The floor vibrated, far too much. He tried to imagine how fast they would be grinding up through the Earth’s atmosphere. Too much of this and the station was going to tear itself apart.

‘We have a green on EV launch,’ he said, suddenly feeling foolish. SILOET’s obsession with stating the obvious over the radio was definitely incongruous in an empty station.

Time to go. He realised he was in good spirits. Action again. Something that mattered. He never thought he would, but he’d missed it. He began the long climb to the flight deck.

In the pressurised chambers, he reached the Doctor, who was arguing with his friends.

‘Why couldn’t you just leave with the others?’ the Doctor was stamping his feet in exasperation. ‘Now I’m going to have to worry about you.’

Jamie was being stubborn. ‘Aye, you will. So make sure you come back.’

‘I could have put the TARDIS in the escape saucer...’

Zoe butted in. ‘We wouldn’t be able to help you out then. You might need us.’

‘Face it, Doctor. You will need us,’ said Jamie. ‘You always do.’

The Doctor started to speak, then spotted Matthews. 'Look,' he said eventually. 'I'm not going to argue with you. We need to get going. Just... stay by the TARDIS.'

Matthews watched him as he unwound a chain from round his neck.

'Doctor,' said Jamie. 'No. You'll be back.'

'Don't be silly, Jamie. You may need this if I don't...'

Zoe put a finger to his lips. 'Ssh. There's nothing to worry about.'

All went tumbling as SKYHOME threw another one of its noisy tantrums. The Doctor stared knowingly at his companions. They ignored him.

Through the open pressure hatch, Matthews saw a helmeted Captain Drake reach KING. He gave the group the thumbs up. 'Doctor,' said Matthews, 'enough now. It's time to go.'

Matthews felt uncomfortable under their stares. He realised it had been a long time since anyone had shown him so much concern. Zoe stretched up to him and he received his first kiss in three decades. 'You're very brave, you know,' she said.

'Aye, well,' Jamie coughed. He held out a hand. 'Good luck and that.'

Matthews smiled. There was something to be said for the company of others after all. You just had to find the right ones. The Doctor had been a good guide, to teach him a thing or two.

'Shall we?' said the Doctor, as the KING engines began to kick in.

So, after thirty years, it was going to be a little man in baggy clothes who would reveal what it was he had been missing. Missing?

What had been taken.

And he might just get to save the planet in the process.

XXX

He was outside Winchester Cathedral and the sun was shining. In fact, it was one of those fantastically sunny days that seem to disappear after the age of eleven.

So that was what it had all been about. Of course. For a moment, he wondered whether the cathedral had been here waiting for him all this time, or whether the Myloki had plucked the image from his subconscious.

He looked around to see that, yes, the colours were right - brighter and truer than adult colours. The lawn was the right green, the river the right rich wine, the thick stone just the right dense grey. The building overshadowed everything, huge and impassive, standing tall as it had stood for centuries, the tourists scuttling round it like transitory insects.

It's an illusion, thought Matthews. Something familiar, emotional memories extracted from my brain and spooled out like an old home movie. I'm supposed to get confused, to blur the difference between reality and fantasy.

The smell was overpowering. Amazing how the olfactory memory can remain so intact for so many years. The air was thick with the perfume of freshly mown grass rolling in like clouds from the nearby Hampshire water meadows.

KING squatted, parked in the gravel outside the cathedral's main archway, tiny beneath the buttresses and iron-grilled stained glass.

The pilot was out and looking up at the thousand-year-old stone colossus. Matthews was genuinely confused now, despite himself. He didn't remember Captain Drake having white hair.

'He doesn't,' said Bishop. 'I took his place.'

'You're not going to ruin everything, are you?' asked Matthews. 'We're so close now.'

Bishop shook his head. 'I had to be here, at the end. I made it possible.'

The Doctor was walking briskly over the river bridge on to the cathedral lawn. His tongue was out as he balanced three ice cream cones. 'Nice of them to provide refreshments!' he shouted. The cones threatened to spill so somehow, impossibly, he juggled them. Not a drop of ice cream fell.

He reached the two soldiers, as the tourists around them laughed and applauded. The Doctor bowed. Ice cream now began to spill all over his hands. As if he had forgotten this would happen, he sheepishly handed them out. 'How did you-?' asked Matthews.

The Doctor licked his hands. 'I think we're all seeing something rather different. For example, in my reality, I'm not giving you ice creams. Understand?'

'Not really.'

His father, benign and ancient, took him by the shoulder. 'Hadn't he been someone else just now?'

'Grant,' he said. 'You don't have to if you don't want to.'

Matthews felt his eyes burn hot with tears. Damn the Myloki. This was Dad as he had been - the time you wanted to tell him you loved him, but you were at precisely the wrong age to do so. He needed to tell the Doctor that Bishop might cause trouble.

Dad led Matthews to the cathedral entrance. Somewhere he heard a clown laughing. 'Is this right?' Matthews asked.

Where Bishop had been a moment ago, there now stood the incongruous figure of an ancient deep-sea diver, mine-shaped helmet, weighted boots and all. He stood outside the cathedral doorway, next to KING, waiting for Matthews to approach.

'Who are you?'

'Don't you remember?' said the diver. 'They told you about me when you were little.'

The Doctor peered out through the helmet grill. 'William Walker, the Winchester Diver.' Thick-gloved hands held out a small pamphlet entitled 'Heritage Trail'. Matthews opened it up and read.

'The diver who saved the cathedral. In 1905 several cracks appeared in the south and east sides of the church and it was feared that, in time, the building might collapse unless major underpinning of the foundations was carried out. Already an extremely difficult task, it was made worse because of high water levels preventing access to the eleventh-century timber rafts. Therefore, this diver was employed to work up to six hours a day, often in 20 feet of water, and in total darkness for a period of some six years. Certainly, if it hadn't been for William Walker's tireless dedication to the Job in hand, this wondrous cathedral might have been lost forever.'

Matthews handed the pamphlet back. 'I get it,' he said. 'Symbolism. I am Walker. You know, I was always afraid to go inside the cathedral.'

'We all were,' the Doctor replied, through the helmet grill. 'You should see where I am.' He looked around, as if surrounded by something very nasty. He crushed the pamphlet in his heavy divers' gloves. 'And what *am* I wearing?'

Bishop was back, blinking in the sunlight. Matthews felt his burning need. In fact, he saw it. Angry red pustules were rising out of the Commander's head, like water balloons. Bishop didn't seem to notice. Where had the Doctor gone? Could he see this?

He caught sight of another familiar face. Familiar... but... someone he'd never actually...

An old man tucked into the darkened doorway. And someone next to him, shadowed, holding his hand. A child. A boy. They both looked at Matthews without emotion.

Where the hell had he seen them before?

They were him. The child he would never be again, and the old man he would never become. Opposite ends of a broken chain.

The Doctor became Dad once more, and Matthews couldn't hold himself in. He understood the past, and the need for Time's passing. Fragile beauty. The Doctor patted his hand, like Dad used to. Matthews wept on his shoulder. He was

weeping for the mortal life he had lost. How it had burnt so bright.

‘This is more difficult than even I thought,’ said Dad.

Bishop was looking at the stubby, solid shape of KING. The sun was beating down and the pub gardens surrounding the cathedral walls were filling up with lunch-time trade. Uniformed kids on a day trip were filing into the grounds over the river bridge. His old school uniform. The memories were drowning Matthews. His eyes stung with his determination to hold back the tears.

‘Doctor,’ said Bishop. ‘There are still the missiles. We could still send a few into -’

Dad became Doctor. ‘No, Bishop. No bangs and flashes. Not this time.’

The old man and the child continued to look at him. Matthews realised the door was solidly locked. Tourists were walking by, reading from guidebooks, pointing out historical features, speaking in a jabber of foreign languages.

An old woman in a yellow mac nudged Bishop. He pushed her away, eyes locked on Matthews. The woman walked on as if not noticing. ‘There must be something, some way to beat them,’ said Bishop. His voice was rising.

‘No,’ said the Doctor. ‘Only Captain Matthews. We all have to be brave.’

Matthews stared at that grey wooden door with its medieval bolts and locks. He saw the man and the boy. They stared, ignoring the bodies that crossed between them.

‘But it might be... terrible for him. Unendurable.’ Bishop made a move for the door. He knocked over a kagouled French man who fell to his knees on to the grass. ‘We can’t let him go in alone. We’d be condemning him to God knows what.’

The Frenchman stood and walked on without a word.

‘Hang on,’ said Matthews. ‘Yesterday you couldn’t wait to see me dead.’ More bodies pushed past. The courtyard was surprisingly full of tourists now, all milling around. And still Matthews could feel the gaze of those that stared, his old and young selves.

Bishop tried to assert his old authority. 'It could be a trick. I'll go in first. Then we still have the chance to negotiate.'

The Doctor took Bishop's hand. They waited for a coach load of German exchange students to file past them - Day-Glo Macs, pink rucksacks and all. Where were all these people coming from? Thought Matthews. What did they represent?

'Commander Bishop,' said the Doctor. 'What is in there, what exists beyond the symbolic entrance, is the Myloki itself. And I think, yes, it will be terrifying. For the first time, I think I have an idea who or what they might be.'

The Doctor thought a moment before speaking. 'I think they are the other side of ourselves. Everything we are not. Literally. A coterminous existence, entirely opposite to all that we understand. But both essential to the other. Yes. Yes, I can believe that.'

Bishop stared at him as if he were mad. 'Do you have any idea what you're saying?'

'Well, I think I do, yes. That's why we fear them - in our dreams, in the dark places. They are what lies beyond death, before birth, outside reality. They are negatives to our positives.'

'How does that help?' asked Bishop. 'Help us... him?'

'Only in that... you, Captain Matthews, are both Myloki and human. You might be the most complete life form. I am sure you will be terrified, yes. It will be everything you ever feared. But it is also the opportunity to master those fears and learn to find the truth of your... condition.'

'A way of living with immortality?' said Matthews, frightening himself.

Tourists were streaming by now. They walked and nudged the three of them as they tried to talk. Matthews felt uncomfortable. There was something going on.

The Doctor nodded. He winced as someone trod on his toe. 'You have to go.'

Bishop still wouldn't let this be all. 'What about the rest of us?' he asked, his voice rising. 'This might sort *him* out, but what about Earth? What guarantees do we have?'

They stared at each other.

'None,' the Doctor replied. 'It's about... I don't know what it's about.'

'I guarantee it,' said Matthews. 'I know. Who are all these people?'

'What people?' asked the Doctor.

'We can't just let him walk in there!' yelled Bishop. 'I've worked too long, too hard!' He turned to walk to the door, but the mass of swarming tourists was too great.

'Open up!' he screeched over the heads of the walkers. He began to shove his way through. 'You won't stop me!'

Matthews tried to get to him but there were too many people. For a second he was lifted from his feet and carried along. They were elbow to elbow out here. He cleared some room for himself but when he looked up, Bishop had disappeared.

'There!' the Doctor shouted, lost in the mass. His arm snaked up over the crowd and pointed. Matthews followed the point and saw white hair. The air was thick with the smell of raincoat rubber and flasks of tea and the murmur of a thousand sightseers.

Matthews pushed his way through. They weren't actively stopping him getting anywhere, it just seemed that wherever he tried to go someone just happened to be there to block him.

'He can't go through!' bellowed the Doctor. 'He'll destroy everything!'

It was almost the cliché of a nightmare, thought Matthews. Clogged and unable to move. He was never going to find Bishop, let alone stop him. What the hell were the Myloki up to?

Then he saw him. Unmistakable. Fighting his way through the passive herd - head down and determined.

As he watched, Bishop appeared to spot something. Something, or someone. The Commander jerked his head in shock.

Matthews went cold. Whatever it was had profoundly surprised Bishop. His eyes were wide, his jaw tightened to

breaking point, a ghastly smile stretched across his face. 'Helen...' Matthews heard him say.

The Doctor had got active. Somehow, he was literally climbing over the crushing tourists. 'Excuse me... so sorry... do you mind?' He was rushing, not caring who he kicked or stubbed, despite his words. 'Matthews,' he said, 'we have to get him back before...' He fell into the crowd.

'Helen!' Bishop shouted, frantic now. 'It's my wife! Doctor, it's my wife! Get out of the way!' he snarled at the crowd. 'Get out!'

Matthews tried to push through but now the bodies were on the move, shoving him, almost pouring him away from his target. 'Bishop!' he yelled, catching a last glimpse of that ruddy face and steel hair. 'Bishop!'

The ground shook and then hands were pulling him down.

The crowd was gone. It was just the Doctor and him.

And two others - at the door. The old man and the boy, still impassive, still patient.

The Doctor was sitting cross-legged on the grass. It was as if the tourists had never been.

'He's gone,' he said.

'Where?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Just gone.'

Dust began to fall from the cathedral. The skies darkened.

'What's happening?' asked Matthews. Something rumbled underground.

'This reality,' said the Doctor. 'I think it's some kind of artificial bridge between the two worlds. The Myloki are having trouble keeping it standing. The two worlds cannot exist together for long. It shouldn't be able to happen at all.'

At the cathedral door, the old man and the boy were turning away. A tiny door had opened up in the larger one. The pair walked through.

'Time's up,' said the Doctor.

And Matthews was frightened. Terrified. More scared than he had ever been in his long, frightening life. Fear suffused

him. He felt weak, sick and paralysed. What if Bishop was right?

The Doctor stood up. He stared at the cathedral. 'I envy you, Captain Matthews,' he said. 'I wish I could accompany you. Maybe I will...'

'Where had that come from? You just told Bishop...'

'I'm not Bishop.'

The Doctor's eyes were soft and liquid. The wind whipped his hair, but he held his stare on Matthews. He was genuine. 'To know yourself completely,' said the Doctor. 'Who wouldn't envy that?'

Matthews nodded. He took the hand from his arm and stared at the door. The two figures were barely visible now, and the man-sized door in the greater door was closing. 'Jamie and Zoe need you, Doctor,' he yelled. 'And they're worth more than any of this.'

With that he ran. The rushing of the wind followed him through the door and then it slammed shut.

EPILOGUE

In a bed in a clinic on an island on the other side of the world, a dwindling man passed away in his sleep. The doctor who pulled the sheet over his face noted a smile on his patient's face.

The message was clear.

The Doctor was going to have to come back soon or there would be nowhere for him to come back to. SKYHOME was dipping and shuddering as if caught in an earthquake. It didn't take a mathematical genius to work out that the station didn't have long left.

Zoe had been pacing the Control Centre, watching the monitors and the enemy nexus over their heads, when she heard the moaning. She followed the sound to a storage cupboard in a dusty rear chamber. Everything loose in the room was rattling.

She opened the door to reveal Captain Drake with a big purple bruise on his forehead and a length of duct tape round his mouth. As Zoe untied him, she wondered just who had been flying KING when the little ship disappeared into that bright ball of energy.

She realised, just as she pulled the tape from Drake's mouth. 'Bishop!'

His nod confirmed everything.

'Zoe! Zoe!' came Jamie's voice from the intercom. 'I've found two security guards. They've been stunned!'

Drake was stretching his cramped muscles. He looked livid at having been overpowered. 'We have to get after them!'

Zoe spotted something on the radar scanner. Something even more important than the realisation that the engines were about to burn out - their dials all in the upper red.

The Myloki grid. The energy readings were...

'They've gone,' she whispered.

It was as if it knew that the inevitable had happened and had given up trying. Now that the drive units were totally blown

and the base was slowly and irrevocably lowering itself towards the Pacific Ocean, SKYHOME appeared to have decided to stabilise itself and take its final journey easy.

In the lounge, Zoe and Jamie and Captain Drake watched KING appear from nowhere into the clear black night sky. Stars glistened out in space and the moon was a fresh, cold scimitar shining down on them.

The reports from Earth were good. It seemed that the crisis had woken humanity up. They were getting organised; something terrible lifted from them. It would take a long time, but Zoe knew they would pull through. They would have to hurry, though. They didn't have that long to build the future, ready for her birth.

KING landed on autopilot. The Doctor was on his own.

He emerged from the aircraft a little jaded, but in good spirits. 'Hello, hello,' he said as he emerged from the door. An impish smile stretched across his face. 'Don't crowd me now. Jamie. Zoe. Yes, I'm pleased to see you too.'

Drake shook his hand. 'Bishop?'

The Doctor shook his head.

'Matthews?'

'I'm not quite sure but ... yes.'

There was an awkward pause. Just how was one supposed to react to the news that the world wasn't going to end after all, thought Zoe.

'Well,' said Drake at last. 'I'd better find those security guys and get us out of here.' He looked at KING critically. 'It'll be a little cramped, but it's better than crashing into the Pacific. We'll fit you in.'

The Doctor produced his TARDIS key. 'Oh, we have our own transport, thank you.' Suddenly he looked very worried. 'We do, don't we?'

Zoe laughed. Jamie looked confused for a second, then laughed too.

Drake shook his head, as if all three of them were mad, then jogged away.

They stood in silence for a while, looking at each other. It was funny, thought Zoe. The three of them, the Doctor, Jamie and herself, had been apart so long, for such a long time, yet she felt they were closer than ever. They would have to be prised apart. She didn't have the words to describe their friendship. Only that she knew it would never be broken. To use a word that seemed quite popular round here, it was indestructible.